

Teacher Perceptions of School Climate During the Transition to  
a Middle School Configuration

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## ABSTRACT

The impact that a year of dynamic changes, including the transition to a middle school configuration, had on the perceptions of teachers about the overall climate of the school was examined in a qualitative case study. Interviews and observations were employed to gather information about the changing attitudes of faculty members as they faced new challenges that came along with the new school. Observations were used to solidify the interviewees' responses.

The year of transition was marked by a steady decline in staff morale and a negative perception of school climate by the majority of teachers. Although there were hosts of contributing factors, based on the data, the primary reasons for the poor climate originated at the school level. These problems included poor administrative support and communication and a general lack of trust among teachers and administrators when making decisions for the welfare of the school.

The primary finding was a distinct need for school leaders to reevaluate the ways they interact with the teaching staff. Recommendations include being more visible and accessible, cutting down on unnecessary reassignments, recognizing ideas and good teaching practices, communicating openly, and reinstating the team teaching approach to foster relationships and enhance teaching abilities.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Richard, who always pulled me from the ruts. Thank you for always reminding me of my goals.

I would also like to dedicate my study to my Mom, Belinda, who has always been a shining example of kindness, intelligence, and integrity.

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Every school inspires certain feelings within its students and teachers. Some evoke an atmosphere that is warm and inviting, making the members feel safe and connected. Others, however, may present a picture of unfriendliness and tension, causing both students and teachers to feel unwelcome and disconnected. Perceptions of the school environment heavily shape the attitudes and behaviors of its members, and these outlooks are major determinants of a school's overall climate (Loukas, 2007).

The National School Climate Council defined school climate simply as “the quality and character of school life” (National School Climate Council, 2013, p. 2). The climate of a school is a strong determinant of academic success for students and the job satisfaction of teachers, and school climate also impacts the emotional well-being of all members. The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASCC) found an inverse relationship between school climate and the measure of the achievement gap for that given institution regardless of ethnic or socio-economic factors (Shindler, Jones, Williams, Taylor, & Cadenas, 2009). Teachers who perceive positive school climates tend to stay employed longer and report higher job satisfaction, and positive school climate also leads to higher organizational commitment and increased teacher involvement (Smith, 2009).

Maier (2010) found that student perceptions often mirror the perceptions of adults at the school, and, therefore, the attitudes and behaviors of the teachers and staff within a

school directly influence the attitudes and behaviors of the students. Gomez (2013) stated teacher perceptions and values are crucial indicators of student performance and that a positive school staff supports positive student outcomes. The importance of school climate has been recognized by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, and the United States (U.S.) Department of Education as a valuable intervention strategy to foster positive relationships and aid in dropout prevention (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).

As an educator, I realize that a school is much more than a content dispenser; it is a community unto itself. A school is essentially an inter-reliant relationship among students, parents, teachers, and administrators as they encounter the ups and downs that go along with the daily workings of any organization. Therefore, the thoughts and feelings of any composite group persuade the overall *healthiness* of the entire school, and this climate is indicative of its quality of learning and sets the tone for its working conditions.

During my career as a teacher I have been fortunate enough to witness a small, struggling school system evolve into a strong, focused educational setting where both students and teachers were proud to attend. I have worked at the same middle school for several years and have seen it grow from a needs improvement school with few opportunities for students to a school consistently making adequate yearly progress with a multitude of extracurricular activities for its youth. This year I was a part of yet another milestone as the fourth through eighth grade school transitioned to two separate schools, an upper elementary school and a traditional middle school. This growth should be interpreted as progress, establishing a new school inevitably presents a wide array of

unforeseen challenges that may very well affect the general climate of the school. How these challenges are handled could impact the emotional, professional, and academic well-being of everyone in the school community.

I love my school, and I feel that I have a vested interest in providing a learning environment that fosters productive and cohesive interactions among all its members. I firmly believe that strong relationships and open communication are the glue that holds a good school together and can foster a community with shared visions and positive outlooks on the process of learning. As an educator, I am convinced that the climate of the school directly determines the outcomes of the school. I know that the better I feel about coming to work, the better I will teach, and the better my students will learn. The better my students learn, the more pride they will take in themselves, and the better adults they will become. Every decision we make and every action we take as educators will somehow, whether directly or indirectly, affect the success of our students and impact the school environment.

Therefore, my motivation for conducting this case study was a desire to maintain the spirit and integrity that took so long to establish in my school. However, a host of factors have emerged with the potential to significantly alter the climate of the school. Changes in school climate result in changes in the attitudes and motivations of teachers which result in changes in the attitudes and motivations of the students. By conducting this research, I hoped to offer a clear and candid appraisal of the perceptions of the present school climate for its teachers and to illuminate some of the reasons for both positive and negative feelings. My aim was to walk in as an observer, but to walk out as a voice for my fellow educators.

### Statement of the Problem

Much of the research available addressing school climate concentrates on how it influences student behaviors and outcomes rather than the issues surrounding educators themselves. However, Huysman (2008) stated that “the most valuable and accessible resources located within a rural school district are the teaching staff” (p. 31). Student achievement is more positively impacted by the quality of teaching than by any other school factor, and teacher perceptions of their working conditions and roles within the school directly affect their job performance (Huysman, 2008). In an age of high-stakes testing and accountability the demand for research on successful practices toward positive school climate has come to the forefront of educational issues. For an institution to improve its climate, a clear understanding of the actual status of the organization is needed (Scallion, 2010). Administrators and policy makers must be cognizant and responsive to the professional and emotional needs of their staff.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceptions of educators of the school’s climate in a year of reorganization. Conducting the case study provided a detailed analysis of the transition of a rural fourth through eighth grade school into two separate institutions, one fourth and fifth grade elementary school and one sixth through eighth grade middle school. The case study was focused on the first year of the middle school and the circumstances that influenced the shaping of the new school’s climate as perceived by the teachers employed there.

The case study was designed to serve as a formative evaluation of the working circumstances driving the emerging climate of the new school and highlighted both

strengths and weaknesses in order to properly diagnose and address problems that may hinder the development of a strong institution (Patton, 2002). The results of this research were intended to aid administrators and policy makers in making informed decisions when developing initiatives to improve the working conditions, and, thus, the learning conditions of educational establishments.

### *Research Questions*

My case study addressed the following questions:

1. How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?
3. What factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate?

### *Significance of the Study*

The newly established middle school is subject to fiscal budget deficits, increases in enrollment, and pressure to meet Focus School requirements within its first year. This research helped to provide an in-depth look into the many challenges that faced the school, teachers, and students from the lens of the employees at this particular institution. This study offered new understanding of the changing needs of educators in the midst of dynamic school changes, which may have directly or indirectly impacted their professional, emotional, and physical well-being.

Measuring school climate allows an open analysis of what is so that educational establishments may move on to what could be. The information from a school climate assessment can be evaluated and utilized in the development of an institutional improvement plan (Scallion, 2010). Information gathered may assist policy makers to design and implement intervention strategies to foster a positive school climate.

Wilbur Middle School is scheduled to relocate to a new facility in two years and, therefore, will once again be faced with the same kinds of obstacles that have accompanied this transition. Recommendations for professional development initiatives, positive leadership practices, and organizational procedures that could raise the level of school climate resulting from this study would be beneficial in future relocations.

### *Definition of Terms*

The terms in this section are directly related to the study and were used throughout the research.

*Case Study.* The case study is a qualitative approach involving the examination of phenomena in a natural setting and the analysis of collected data from the participant's perspectives. Like most qualitative methods, the case study relies heavily on detailed descriptions rather than numerical results (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The case study method situates the researcher in the context of the events and subjects being studied. In-depth data are gathered in the form of interviews, observations, and document interpretations (Merriam, 2002).

*Focus School.* This term refers to one of three accountability designations developed by the Department of Education. This title replaces the *needs improvement* label previously used to target *Title I* schools that have a high percentage of low-income



students. Being designated as a Focus School is a result when a high school has a graduation rate of less than 60% for over 2 years or when any school has a substantial achievement gap between the highest achieving subgroup and the lowest achieving subgroup (Washington, 2012).

*Interpretivism.* This approach to social research advocates that researchers concentrate on the interpretations that subjects create for the social events they experience and formulate theories based on these perceptions (Maxwell, 2005).

*Middle School.* This term is defined as a school, which incorporates sixth, seventh, and eighth grades (NMSA, 2003).

*School Climate.* For the purpose of this study, this refers to the shared norms, aims, relationships, practices, and organizational structure of an educational setting (NSCC, 2013).

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Every school has its own climate that may be perceived as positive or negative and is often a reflection of the thoughts and beliefs of the school's stakeholders as they contend with the unique context of their learning situations (Loukas, 2007). The purpose of this literature review was to evaluate the existing research on school climate and its impact on the learning community. The review of literature also examined some of the unique circumstances influencing the establishment of the climate of the school studied.

Much of the literature reviewed was gathered from various educational and scholarly journals and spans the last fifteen years. The primary emphasis of the review was on the concept of school climate and its fundamental determinants, including feelings of safety, establishment of relationships, and conditions of the physical environment. The other sections focused on additional features of the selected school that contributed to the school climate, such as the rural setting, the transition to a middle grades configuration, and the designation as a Focus School.

#### School Climate

The outlooks and emotions prompted by a school's atmosphere define its overall climate. School climate encompasses a mixture of physical, social, and academic dimensions that collectively determine the health of the institution (Cohen & Geier, 2010). Physical components include factors such as school appearance and the organization of classrooms. Social elements involve relationships between teachers and

students and students' sense of equity and fairness in those relationships. Academic factors include the quality of instruction and teacher expectations (Loukas, 2007).

School climate has become a major global focus in school reform endeavors, and the U.S. Department of Education has even established the Safe Schools Grant to fund state measurement efforts and initiatives to improve school climate based on the contention that it has a direct impact on the achievement of both students and teachers (Gangi, 2009). Institutions with positive school climates foster self-worth, respect, and trust among children and adults and build a sense of community that goes beyond academics (Smith, 2009). Middle school students tend to have higher self-esteem and lower at-risk behavior in schools with positive climates, and high school students have reported fewer drug abuse and psychological problems in positive school climates. School climate also affects the emotional exhaustion and feelings of personal accomplishment for school personnel.

Positive climates have been shown to be especially beneficial for minority, poor, and female students (Doll, 2010; Shindler et al., 2009). Studies have indicated that positive school climates can compensate for external factors affecting student achievement such as socioeconomic status and living environment. Schools demonstrating better climates tend to have more narrow achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and attendance rates are higher for both students and teachers.

Realizing the importance of school climate, many states have stipulated that school improvement plans incorporate measures to address this critical factor (Thapa et al., 2013). In 2007 the National School Climate Council (NSCC) developed a list of

standards designed to offer a framework for educational stakeholders to reference when evaluating and implementing school climate initiatives (NSCC, 2013). These five fundamental standards coincide with national measures for content, leadership, and professional learning.

The first standard is the development of a unified plan for creating and maintaining a positive school climate that entails the implementation of policies and practices which advocate cooperation among school, family, students, and the community to build safe and effective learning environments (NSCC, 2013). School members regularly gather and assess data to monitor the perceived climate of a given institution, and schools offer prevention and intervention strategies to promote positive school climate.

The second standard involves the institutionalization of policies designed to address the “social, emotional, ethical and civic, as well as intellectual, skills, and dispositions” (NSCC, 2013, p. 5) in ways that complement the learning and cultural needs of all students. Steps are taken to institute a sense of mutual respect and community between teachers and students. Barriers to education are identified and addressed and strategies are implemented to reach disengaged learners.

The third school climate standard calls for the use of classroom-based practices that support the policies initialized to promote growth in all areas (NSCC, 2013). School-wide practices stress responsible decision making and awareness of life options as well as the value of intrinsic motivation and setting positive goals. Programs are implemented to offer supplemental services to both students and families and to develop stronger community connections.

Standard four endorses the creation of a safe school environment (NSCC, 2013). School-wide improvement efforts offer a setting where staff, students, and families feel welcomed and comfortable. Stakeholders are frequently asked to assess the climate and to offer suggestions as to how it may be improved. School leaders monitor intervention strategies and utilize collected data to make needed modifications.

The fifth standard encourages schools and educators to model ethical and culturally responsible behavior (NSCC, 2013). The curriculum supports the acceptance and appreciation of different backgrounds and beliefs. Administrators model the moral qualities they wish their teachers to display. In turn, teachers exhibit character traits such as compassion, respect, and patience and demonstrate the qualities contributing to being a productive member of society. Steps are also taken to ensure that every student has a caring and responsive connection to an adult in the school.

The five school climate standards serve as an outline for building positive environments for everyone. The standards are, however, mere guidelines and do not mandate specific actions or programs. School systems and individual institutions are responsible for developing their own initiatives based on the priorities and contextual needs of the community. The elements that comprise a school's climate have long been debated as different schools have their own unique influences (NSCC, 2013). In 2007, the NSCC defined school climate to be the interaction of certain school components, which may be construed as either negative or positive. These factors include a sense of safety, relationships among school stakeholders, teaching and learning circumstances, and the physical conditions of the school (Gangi, 2009).

The NSCC (2013) recognized the need for a secure and welcoming learning environment as the most important climate factor for the academic and social well-being of students. Guaranteeing the physical and emotional safety of students and teachers is critical to creating a “psychology of success” (Shindler, Jones, Williams, & Cadenas, 2009, p. 10) in a school, and studies have demonstrated a deeper sense of safety in schools which focus on positive community building rather than strict discipline measures. Feeling unsafe undermines student development and achievement, and a positive school climate promotes less hostility and a heightened sense of security for all stakeholders (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008).

Psychological safety for students includes non-physical forms of bullying and is associated with feelings of inadequacy and perceptions of not belonging by at-risk students (Gangi, 2009). Episodes of emotional bullying pose a profound threat to the psychological welfare of students, and incidents such as “gossip, hallway fights, and yelling matches between students and teachers” (Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2011, p. 1) directly affect feelings of safety. Other factors include stealing, vandalizing property, slandering, and intentional exclusion from groups and activities. Psychological intimidation often leads to violent behavior (Maier, 2010).

Physically or psychologically threatening conditions within the classroom also detract from the teacher’s ability to instruct (Steinberg et al., 2011). Safety, therefore, is an essential element for the satisfaction and professional attitudes of teachers (Thapa et al., 2013). Safety concerns for teachers include not only violence issues, but also the need for clear policies and consistent professional support. Fisher (2011) found that major reasons for teacher stress were a lack of administrative support and an excessive

workload, resulting in almost half of teachers leaving the field by their sixth year of teaching. When staff members of a learning community feel valued and cared for, job performance and retention rates increase (NSCC, 2013).

How connected people feel to one another is fundamental to establishing a positive school climate (Cohen & Geier, 2010). A 2007 climate survey of 108 schools found that unless positive relationships are established in difficult school environments, strengthening the instruction process will do very little to improve academic achievement (Perkins, 2007). A school creates a host of dynamic relationships among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community itself, and the nature of these relationships is a strong indicator of the overall climate of the school. Gangi (2009) reported that any learning environment in which all members do not interact well together negatively impacts mental health. The NSCC (2013) stressed the need for supportive, ethical and respectful relationships between staff and students to be a major standard in positive school climate reform, and a lack of emotional bonding was recognized as a major barrier to building a positive school atmosphere. Moreover, relationships among students, teachers, parents, and administrators directly affect the self-efficacy of all members of the school community (Maier, 2010; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012).

Learners who identify a sense of community within their school believe their environment to be both emotionally and intellectually safe (Maier, 2010). In fact, the NSCC (2013) recognized the establishment of at least one connection with a caring school adult figure to be essential in the development of a school perceived as safe by its students. Those who feel a sense of connectedness within the school environment are

less likely to exhibit emotional or behavioral problems, and students who have positive perceptions of relationships with teachers and peers have higher self-esteem and are more academically successful (Loukas, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013). Wiley, Good, and McCaslin (2008) also suggested a positive correlation between teacher-student connectedness and student motivation.

Students who report having positive school connectedness are less likely to experience depressive symptoms or participate in delinquent misconduct (Hawkins, Monahan, & Oesterie, 2010). Strong school relationships are one of the most critical components of African American and Latino students' perceptions of school climate and willingness to respect school rules and practices (Thapa et al., 2013). Good student-teacher bonds and a strong sense of community tend to minimize at-risk students' fear at school. Moreover, strong school affiliations help to counteract the effects of other life stressors, such as poor parent relations or low socio-economic conditions (Akiba, 2010; Hawkins, Monahan, & Oesterie, 2010).

Trust is pivotal to building connectedness between teachers, students, administrators, and all school staff members. Bankole (2011) described trust as an inclination to take risks based on the belief that fellow school members exhibit and practice morally sound qualities. Brand (2011) found that students viewed at-risk behaviors more favorably in schools lacking proper teacher trust, and Hicks (2011) identified trust as the most influential support for sustaining positive school environments.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) identified five traits that trustworthy people display: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Benevolence refers to



kindness and concern for others. Small actions like remembering birthdays or being accommodating when emergencies arise foster positive perceptions. Honesty and openness entail being truthful and forthcoming with information and being receptive of the opinions and ideas of others. Candid relationships nurture interactive dialogues where school members are likely to discuss and diffuse problems before they grow out of control. Reliability means that a person stays true to his word and is consistent in his actions, and competence refers to being good at one's job so that others may depend on your skills.

All five characteristics are important, but teachers found benevolence to be the most desirable quality in a good administrator (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The teachers' trust in administration is the foundation for creating a trusting environment, and teacher trust is greatly determined by leadership practices. A good teacher-principal bond increases the likelihood of teacher buy-in for school reform practices (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) and also improves the possibility that teachers, students, and parents will form positive and productive relationships.

Good teacher-student relationships promote feelings of competency and success for teachers and academic and social security for students (Curtis, 2012). The intergenerational relationships between students and teachers tend to be key determinants of students' social integration in the school, and Rassiger (2011) found the perception of positive, caring relationships with teachers to be stronger influences on academic motivation than perceptions of the relevance or future benefits of instruction. Teachers serve as models that may positively or negatively impact the moral, academic, and

psychological development of students, and the teacher-student relationship is the most influential interaction on academic achievement (Doll, 2010; Gangi, 2010).

Peer support is critical to job commitment for teachers and emotional interactions with co-workers impact psychological well-being (Smith, 2009). Good teacher-teacher relationships are characterized by friendliness and support for one another, tolerance and appreciation of differences, and willingness to give or receive instructional materials and ideas, and poor support structures and feelings of isolation are the primary factors contributing to teacher burnout (Hanson, O'Malley, & Zheng, 2012; Scallion, 2010). Strong collegial relationships enable teachers to share day to day frustrations and to brainstorm ideas and have been shown to play a pivotal role in teachers' decisions to remain in the field of education (Doll, 2010; O'Malley et al., 2012). Positive peer relationships also foster heightened states of professionalism (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012).

Scallion (2010) stated that the principal is "the key component to shaping a school" (p. 15). The type of leadership a school principal displays directly impacts the climate of the school and, therefore, influences the achievement of its students (Scallion, 2010). Interactions with school leaders impact the job performance of the teacher, and administrators act "as the role model for the demeanor they wish to see in the staff members and the school" (Duff, 2013, p. 38). In fact, the quality of the teacher-administrator relationships has been found to be more significant to teacher retention than availability of resources, size of workload, or adequacy of training (Tierney, 2012). Principals who are perceived as considerate and concerned evoke a community of trust and actively involve stakeholders by building strong trusting relationships that ease the

process of change and provide teachers with a sense of loyalty to a common purpose (Price, 2011).

Good principal-teacher bonds are fostered by administrators who encourage teachers to act independently and support their chosen instructional methods. In 2012 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) which examined the perceived working conditions of almost five million educators globally. Results indicated that one in five teachers claim to have never received appraisal for their work, and 75% of respondents believed that they would not be recognized even if they attempted to improve the quality of their instruction

The physical environment of a school relates to its age, design, and overall condition (Vandiver, 2011). The institutional environment also refers to the order, cleanliness, and appeal of the school building (NSCC, 2010). Factors contributing to the physical quality of a school include air quality, acoustics, availability of natural sunlight, and sufficient space (Cheng, English, & Filardo, 2011). The upkeep of bathrooms, working condition of water fountains, absence of graffiti, and accessibility to technology are just a few considerations in the assessment of the physical environment. The physical environment has often been perceived as an “emotional gesture” (Sanoff & Walden, 2012, p. 282) evoking general feelings of sadness or enthusiasm.

Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) found a direct correlation between facility quality and student achievement, especially in the areas of math and language arts. Favorable physical environments were also associated with increased reading scores for high school students (Filardo, 2008). Students attending substandard schools

demonstrate higher suspension rates and lower standardized test scores. Absenteeism and drop-out rates are higher in poorly maintained schools, and vandalism and destruction of property are also more prominent in schools with low aesthetic qualities (Cheng, English, & Filardo, 2011; Sanoff & Walden, 2012). Students attending such schools also exhibit higher concerns for their safety (Akiba, 2010).

The physical setting also impacts teacher morale and retention. Uline (2008) indicated a positive relationship between facility quality and teacher professionalism, and Baker and Bernstein (2012) found that physical factors may have more influence on teachers' decisions to remain at a school than salary. Moreover, the structural environment has been shown to impact the process of teacher recruitment (Cheng et al., 2011).

Despite the obvious need for suitable facilities, Tanner (2008) reported that almost one-fourth of public schools in the United States were in poor condition. Disorganized layouts and improper upkeep can foster problems such as the development of mold or other allergens leading to "sick building syndrome" (Filardo, 2008, p. 4). Classrooms without proper air conditioning systems may foster drowsiness and fatigue causing the students to concentrate more heavily on staying awake than on paying attention to the instruction (Sanoff & Walden, 2012). Moreover, the size of a school is a relevant consideration of the physical environment. In 2007, almost one-third of the nation's schools suffered from overcrowding (Tanner, 2008).

### The Middle School Design

In the nineteenth century public education consisted mainly of one-room common schools providing a very basic curriculum lasting an average of 8 years (McEwin &

Greene, 2011). Industrial growth and changing labor demands, however, necessitated the extension of public education to adequately prepare students to join the workforce. By 1900, many districts had adopted a two-tier system consisting of a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school and a ninth through twelfth grade high school. This format was soon reevaluated, however, as educators recognized the lack of attention being given to the distinct characteristics of adolescents.

The first junior high schools emerged in 1909 as a response to the demand for more responsive approaches to adolescent education (McEwin & Greene, 2011). This configuration separated the grades into three levels: an elementary school, a junior high school, and a senior high school. The junior high school typically included grades 7 through 9 and was intended to be a preparation for one of two high school tracks, college preparation or vocational readiness (Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009). The model failed to meet its purpose, however, as educators were not formally trained in the appropriate methods to reach this age group. Consequently many of the junior high schools merely mirrored the high school design.

William Alexander first introduced the middle school concept in 1963 as a response to a growing concern that public schools were inadequate in meeting the unique demands of adolescent children (Huss & Estep, 2011). The middle school generally incorporated grades 6–8, replacing the traditional K–8 model or the junior high design. Theoretically, middle schools provided students with a smooth transition from the focus on learning years of elementary school to the focus on earning years of high school (American College of Testing, 2008). Proponents of the plan cited the need for specialized services and facilities to address the complex emotional, social, physical, and

academic issues associated with these developmental years (Cook et al., 2009). The new grade configuration also allowed school districts to alleviate some of the overcrowding issues plaguing elementary schools by relocating sixth grade to the middle school. In 2010 there were more than 13,000 public middle schools in the U.S., replacing the junior high model by a ratio of about ten to one (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012).

The most widely accepted standard for establishing effective middle level schools was outlined in the National Middle School Association's (NMSA) position paper, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003). This document listed four essential attributes for successful middle schools. First, a middle school must be developmentally responsive, allowing the curriculum to be driven by the nature of the students it serves. The curriculum should also be challenging, requiring the learners to be held to high standards. The school environment should be empowering, urging students to be confident and in control. Finally, the education provided should be equitable, ensuring that all students have the right to learn in a safe and comfortable setting (NMSA, 2003). Realizing these goals involves implementing programs and policies supporting a list of key characteristics directed at improving the curriculum, leadership, and culture of the school.

Addressing curriculum and instruction includes ensuring teachers are qualified and prepared to educate middle level students and use a variety of teaching approaches (NMSA, 2003). The curriculum should be challenging and relevant in order to engage students, and assessments should be utilized not only to measure progress, but also as a diagnostic tool to improve learning. Leadership and organization characteristics involve developing vision statements that guide school decisions and represent the best interests

of all stakeholders. Leaders must be aware of emerging research on middle level learners and should offer ongoing and relevant professional development opportunities for teachers (NMSA, 2003). Elements related to culture and communities include ensuring that school environments are safe and inclusive for all learners and that parents are actively involved in the education process. There should also be purposeful relationships established between teachers and students and counselors should promote programs supporting the physical and social well-being of students (NMSA, 2003).

The NMSA (2003) identified several key components for the exemplary middle school curriculum, one of them being interdisciplinary team teaching. Team teaching has been widely accepted as an integral part of a good middle school design. Ideally, interdisciplinary team teaching involves teachers sharing the same group of students, a common schedule, and the same area in the school building (Irvin, 1997). These teams are designed to give students a small group of peers and adults that focus on their academic and social needs. The team teaching approach allows a transition period from the single class elementary setting to the multi-class, multi-teacher high school environment.

Teaching teams offer a host of benefits for both teachers and students. Teachers work with fixed groups of students, allowing them to form deeper bonds and to know their students well (Turning Points, n.d.). Teachers are then more equipped to discuss and share their thoughts and concerns about individual students with one another and collectively with parents. The *interdisciplinary* aspect enables teachers to make connections across the disciplines, thus making learning more meaningful to the students. The practice also provides a support structure for the teachers involved as they share one

another's experiences and discourages teacher isolation. Moreover, the longer a team stays together, the more they share a vision to improve student achievement (Haverback & Mee, 2013).

Similar to the junior high school model, however, the middle school concept has come under scrutiny. Much of the criticism has stemmed from the disregard many middle schools have given to the implementation guidelines laid out by *This We Believe* (Huss & Eastep, 2011). Many schools viewed the initiatives as mutually exclusive and failed to effectively execute the plan, employing isolated suggestions rather than adopting the entire design. Some schools have been middle schools in name only with the curriculum being driven by accountability issues rather than accommodating the specific needs of adolescents. Critical design elements such as interdisciplinary team teaching and diverse exploratory opportunities have often been sacrificed in order to prepare students for standardized testing (Huss & Eastep, 2011).

*The Forgotten Middle*, a 2008 research report by the American College of Testing, stated that the middle school years were pivotal in determining future productivity. In fact, they suggested that academic performance in the eighth grade was strongly indicative of a student's decision to go to college. However, Cook, Faulkner, and Kinne (2009) pointed out that the middle school concept was often criticized because of its focus on identity development rather than academic achievement. Educators and policy makers have indicated that the middle school movement forces academic advancement to be superseded by "such ends as self-exploration, socialization, and group learning" (Cook et al., 2009, p. 1).



In response to the shortcomings of the middle school model many school districts have reverted to a traditional K-8 configuration (West & Schwerdt, 2012). The rationale behind the change has been based on research suggesting schools with wider grade spans support deeper attachments for students and teachers and reduce common middle school problems such as discipline issues and absenteeism (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young, & Young, 2011). Elementary schools were considered by many to be *safe* environments in contrast to middle schools that were often plagued by a decline in academic achievement and lowered student self-esteem (Mertens & Anfara, 2008).

### Rural Schools

Nearly one third of the nation's schools are located in rural areas serving over 20% of American students (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010), and these schools have seen a steady increase in enrollment. Rural schools have become more than just educational institutions; they often serve as the central hub for a community. Smaller school districts have been shown to have lower average dropout rates, higher attendance rates, greater extra-curricular participation, and are more likely to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets than the state average (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009).

Rural communities have faced a host of challenges including physical isolation, limited job markets, and an out-migration of potential talent, all contributing to the weakened economic and social climate often seen in rural places (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012). Rural education systems have been heavily affected by the unique circumstances faced by their localities. Rural schools must adhere to the same policies and laws of larger systems, but have often lacked resources to satisfy these requirements (Huysman, 2008). A diminishing tax base and increase in state budget cuts have resulted

in limited funding for rural schools (American Youth Policy Forum, 2010). The repercussions of inadequate resources manifest themselves in the educational outcomes observed.

Funding has been a major obstacle for rural schools (Southern Education Forum, 2013). Many government programs base their funding on the number of students served by a school system (American Youth Policy Forum, 2010), and larger urban schools have often received higher financial allocations because the need is more obvious. For example, Title I funding was developed specifically to target schools in which poverty is heavily concentrated. Rural schools have typically enrolled fewer students than their urban or suburban counterparts, resulting in a decreased percentage of financial support. School districts are required to allocate Title I funding only to schools with at least a 75% poverty rate, which eliminates most rural high schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Moreover, the formulas used to allocate Title I funding typically result in a disproportionate amount of support allocated to larger urban school districts. Current budget proposals require competitive applications for federal funding, necessitating additional manpower and adding more of a financial strain to the local school system (AYPF, 2010). Many smaller communities lack the support needed to complete the process of accessing additional funding. State and local sources provide most funding for public education, and states have the authority to distribute the money at their discretion. Unfortunately, rural communities that lack industry or business development are often viewed as disposable and receive a smaller piece of the pie (Budge, 2006).

In rural communities, teaching has been one of few professional jobs available. However, rural teachers usually have fewer years of experience and are less likely to

have or pursue advanced degrees (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Rural schools have been considered hard to staff because they are located in remote areas, do not offer substantial local supplements, and lack quality resources when compared to more urban districts. Higher salaries offered by larger school systems have attracted more capable and experienced teachers (Baker, 2012). Smaller communities often have been unable to recruit or retain a highly qualified teaching staff, and rural teachers have been forced to teach more than one subject and sometimes multiple grade levels. Moreover, restricted capital has hindered opportunities for professional development. Teacher salaries and transportation costs can account for up to 90% of a school's budget, leaving few resources available for professional development (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007). Geographic isolation and small numbers of teachers in any specific content area have made on-site professional development opportunities unfeasible (Mizell, 2010). Often the training available requires extensive travel on the part of the teacher, and these centralized trainings are usually broad in scope and do not target the individual needs of the rural teachers (Harmon et al., 2007).

Huysman (2008) pointed out that teacher attrition rates have typically been high in many rural settings. In a 2008 study of a rural Florida school district, Huysman found a 22% turnover within a 2-year period. Professional development opportunities and collaboration with experienced teachers rank as the most determinate factors of whether or not a teacher decides to remain in a teaching position (Harmon et al., 2007). Rural schools often have few teachers in any one content area or grade level, and new teachers are often exposed to challenging teaching situations without the guidance of a mentor or a proper support system. Environmental factors are major influences on a teacher's

decision to remain in a rural area, and many new teachers are unaccustomed to the realities of rural living. Barley (2009) indicated that circumstances such as a lack of social opportunities, distance from family and friends, and inaccessibility to medical and shopping resources may trigger teacher turnover if workplace conditions are unsatisfactory.

There have been perceived advantages to rural schools. Most rural schools have small enrollments, allowing for reduced class sizes, which have proven to have positive effects on standardized test scores and on school achievement. Jimerson (2006) found that reduced class sizes were highly beneficial for minority and low income students. A 2003 reduction experiment in Tennessee concluded that smaller teacher to student ratios resulted in statistically significant improvements in math and reading skills, and that smaller class sizes led to fewer discipline problems, fewer grade retentions, and a higher graduation level (Isernhagen, 2010).

Rural schools have often been seen as entities tying a community together, with athletic activities, school plays, and town meetings giving residents a means of interaction in an environment with few opportunities for social networking (Lyson, 2004). Moreover, rural school systems employ a substantial number of residents and provide an anchoring point to encourage families to remain in the area, and smaller schools often have closer ties with parents and the community (Isernhagen, 2010)

### Race to the Top

The Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) established a sizeable allocation of funding to invest in education (Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, 2012). The initiative was titled the Race to the Top (RT3) fund and offered

\$4.35 billion to states willing to follow certain guidelines in order to improve public education systems. The areas for reform are:

- Designing and using academic standards that are common across the states and are rigorous enough to prepare learners for college and careers.
- Recruiting and keeping good teachers in the public schools.
- Using statewide data systems to make diagnostic decisions for instruction and intervention.
- Creating plans to improve low-performing schools (Whitehouse, 2009).

States were required to apply for grants to sponsor programs aimed at closing the achievement gap and lowering drop-out rates. Those receiving funds were required to implement the proposed plan and their progress was monitored by the U.S. Department of Education (Weiss, 2013).

A 2013 study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute reviewed the progress that states had made after 3 years in the RT3 program. The examination revealed that most of the participating states were far behind schedule in fulfilling proposed plans. The setbacks were mainly a result of the states setting unrealistic goals and encountering unexpected complications. The majority of grantee states had to delay the implementation of teacher evaluation systems due to insufficient time and inadequate preparation. Furthermore, the initiatives stressed by RT3, teacher accountability and recruitment, account for very little of student achievement. The most influential factors, poverty level and race, were not being addressed using RT3 funds (Weiss, 2013).

The state in which this study took place received \$400 million from RT3 funding over 4 years to implement reform measures. Half the money remained at the state level

and half was allocated to 26 local education agencies (LEA's) to support proposed improvement programs. State funding was partially intended to supply professional development on delivering the Common Core standards and to developing new assessments and data systems (GPED, 2013).

### The Common Core and New Standardized Tests

The state adopted a new standardized test designed to assess students' ability to compete on a nationwide basis rather than just at the state level. Modeled much like the standardized tests being introduced in Georgia, New York, and Texas, the test is intended to increase student understanding by focusing on fewer skills with deeper understanding and includes more questions requiring the use of critical thinking skills (Georgia Department of Education, 2013; New York State Education Department, 2014; Texas Education Agency, 2011). Unlike the previous state test, the new assessment incorporates open-ended items in addition to multiple choice questions, and students will be required to get a higher percent of items correct to pass the test (National Parent Teacher Association, 2013).

The state test is intended to measure students' proficiency with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a nationwide framework of desirable skills specific to each grade level. The motivation behind CCSS is to create a uniform set of curriculum guidelines that could easily be transferred from state to state, allowing a curricular consistency rather than different expectations in different locations (Millar, 2012). The standards were developed in response to the tremendous disparities between state standardized test averages and national averages. For instance, in the state of Georgia 93% of fourth grade students met or exceeded standards on the 2013 standardized test,

yet only 34% performed at or above proficiency on the national level (GDOE, 2014). Over 45 states have now adopted the standards (GPED, 2013).

The new standards have proven to be frustrating for many teachers who feel that the transition to Common Core was done in haste and without proper guidance. Educators specified a definite need for training on how to decipher and deliver the new standards (McShane, 2013). During a 2012 study of California teachers, researchers found that middle and high school teachers requested training on the Common Core curriculum and that elementary teachers were unsure how to implement the new standards (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2012). Teachers felt they needed better materials that demonstrated the rigor of CCSS, yet acquiring adequate resources posed major challenges. Polikoff (2014) assessed the alignment between commonly used math textbooks and the Common Core standards in Florida and found that only 27% to 38% of the content correlated even though the texts had been advertised as Common Core aligned.

Originally, the state where this study was conducted was slated to administer the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness in College and Career (PARCC) test, a computer-based assessment developed by a group of states to test the English and mathematics skills of K-12 students (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2015). The PARCC assessment is one of two tests offered nationwide to test the Common Core, and initially more than 20 states joined the consortium (Pritchett, 2013). The test is designed to evaluate math and language arts skills only and theoretically offers a means of establishing a uniform system of

accountability across the states rather than each individual state setting its own bar for success (Chingos, 2012).

However, the Brown Center on Education Policy (2012) examined the average cost per pupil to administer standardized tests in 45 different states. This investigation revealed that at least 13 of the states considered spent less than \$20 per student. For instance, California spends an average of \$16 per student and Georgia spends only \$14 per student (Chingos, 2012). At \$29.50 per student, the cost to administer the PARCC assessment would have almost doubled the budget for many of the states (Rix, 2013). Moreover, many states were not prepared for the technological demands required by the PARCC test and lacked the funding needed to upgrade or expand their services (Pritchett, 2013).

The heavy financial and technological burden associated with the PARCC test has generated a mass exodus by many states, including Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Oklahoma (GPPE, 2013). These states have opted to cut down on expenses by creating their own Common Core assessments. Modeled after the PARCC test, the new exams will go beyond simple multiple choice questions to include short answer and essay components. Some states, including North Carolina and Kansas, are using tests formed by state universities and others have contracted the design to vendors such as Pearson or McGraw-Hill (Chingos, 2012).

The use of standardized tests has for many years been the source of great debate. Proponents have pointed out that such measurements create a level playing field by offering an organizational framework to guide educators in their instruction (OccupyTheory, 2014). Testing also allows student achievement to be compared beyond



the individual classrooms because the same test is administered across the district, state, or even the nation. Standardized tests theoretically provide a cheap and expedient way to determine whether or not schools are performing adequately (Gawthrop, 2014). Critics claim that the tests do not accurately compare or represent student achievement as each individual state sets its own bar for success (GPPE, 2013). Also, the traditional multiple choice mode of testing neglects to gauge the creativity or critical thinking skills a student possesses.

The newly developed assessment being introduced at the school used for this study has sparked further controversy. Although former assessments have been portrayed as watered down and shallow, many feel that the latest test swings too far in the opposite direction. Common Core standards call for more *rigor* in the curriculum, requiring that students demonstrate a deeper understanding of the material being tested rather than just the ability to memorize facts (National PTA, 2013).

One means for determining rigor has been Webb's depth of knowledge (DOK) classification system that has often been used to categorize the complexity of questions in state assessments (Herman & Linn, 2013). The scale reflects four levels of understanding:

- DOK1: Basic recall of information (rote memorization).
- DOK2: Basic application of learned information (an example would be completing basic mathematical operations).
- DOK3: Application requiring some critical thinking or problem solving skills (drawing conclusions or predicting outcomes given abstract information).

- DOK4: Creation of original product based on research or comparisons  
(writing a research paper or evidence based thesis) (Herman & Linn, 2013, p. 10)

A 2012 study published by RAND Education used Webb’s DOK framework to rate the rigor of the mathematics and language arts portions of 17 state standardized tests (Yuan & Le, 2012). The states were chosen due to the reported high complexity of their assessments, and researchers examined over 5000 test items during the study. Results from this study indicated that the tests being administered did not measure higher order (DOK3 and DOK4) levels of thinking. In fact, only 2% of the math questions analyzed were Level 3 questions.

The new assessments being developed will target higher order thinking. Developers have suggested that at least two-thirds of the questions on a standardized test should address Levels, 2, 3, and 4 if the assessment is truly reflective of content mastery (EducationFirst, 2013). This arrangement inevitably creates a shock to the system for students who have for years been exposed only to multiple choice formats, and states who have administered the revamped tests have seen dramatic score drops. In New York, some schools saw drops of as much as 72% in math achievement scores. In Kentucky, scores fell by at least 33% in elementary and middle schools (Marzano & Toth, 2014).

### Teacher Evaluations

The National Education Association (2015) advocated teacher evaluation in order to “strengthen the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and classroom practices of professional educators” (p. 2). These assessments have historically served as *good teacher-bad teacher* selection instruments with little attention given to the professional needs of those

being observed. Marzano (2012) specified two major purposes for teacher evaluation: development and measurement. Developmental evaluations are intended to guide teaching practices and influence classroom management. Measurement evaluations gauge the competence and professional knowledge of the teacher. Developmental evaluations can be likened to formative assessments, while measurement evaluations are tied to summative evaluations.

The NEA (2015) outlined some key components of effective teacher evaluations. One element is the need for consistent and open collaboration. The process should be transparent from beginning to end so that teachers do not feel threatened or unsure of what is expected of them. Moreover, any assessment of a teacher's performance should be based on multiple measures with useable feedback offered to the teacher during the developmental evaluations. Recommendations should be viewed as guidance rather than criticism. Also, the evaluations should be based on the content standards, the professional development offered, and support activities the teacher has received. The assessment should measure how well the teacher is utilizing these tools. Another essential element is that valid measures are used. A teacher's effectiveness should be appraised according to research-based and widely accepted criteria. Lastly, teachers should have a voice in the creation of evaluation systems and should be allowed to incorporate learning goals for their individual circumstances.

Traditional evaluation systems have seldom included the elements outlined. Teachers have often been observed as little as once every 2 years, especially veteran teachers (Brandt, Mathers, Oliva, Brown-Sims, & Hess, 2007). The observations that are conducted are relatively short and offer little information for effective feedback, and the

format of the evaluation is often a summative *pass-fail* design without a formative piece. Therefore, professional development programs are not developed to improve instructional practices.

Today many states are revising their evaluation programs and creating assessments designed to elicit useable information for both teachers and evaluators (Hull, 2013). Over 40 states now use systems based on multiple sources of data, and more than half use test results to determine professional development needs. The evaluations are also used to make personnel decisions.

There is, however, a growing concern over the inclusion of student achievement scores in the teacher evaluations. Forty-five states require that evaluations incorporate evidence of student progress, and 19 of those have identified achievement as the most influential factor in determining teacher performance (Doherty & Jacobs, 2013). Some states like Georgia and Colorado count student growth as 50% of the overall evaluation. Evidence of student growth may be in the form of standardized test scores, student portfolios, or post-test results. Teachers and administrators have questioned the use of *value-added* measures as an evaluation tool (David, 2010). Value-added refers to the amount that a teacher enables a student to go above and beyond what is the expected level of improvement. The argument lies in the belief that student scores are not solely a result of teaching practices. Many other factors, including attendance rates and socioeconomic conditions, are just as influential on academic progress (Brandt et al., 2013).

The state in which this study took place is one of many adopting a new teacher evaluation system. The new process is similar to the programs used in other states such

as New York's Advance program (New York City Department of Education, 2013).

Unlike former evaluations that had a simple *pass-fail* format, the new evaluations are based on a combination of observations, evidence of student growth, and student feedback through surveys.

The observation element allows the evaluator to gauge the teachers' performance on presenting Common Core content and is based on a detailed rubric broken down into five domains, each consisting of two standards (GaDOE, 2014; NYCDOE, 2013).

Teachers receive a certain number of formative (informal) evaluations and at least two summative (formal) evaluations. A performance appraisal rubric is designed to describe how well each standard is being presented, and evaluators are required to include feedback for each item observed. Teachers must access the evaluation and sign that they have read and understand the ratings, but they are allowed to respond to the critique.

The next element, measurement of student growth, is determined by comparing a student's progress from 1 year to the next based on standardized test scores (GaDOE, 2014; NYCDOE, 2013). Student growth indicates a student's progress compared to other students with similar testing histories. A student may earn a score from 1 to 99 based on the level of growth. For subjects that are not included in standardized testing, each school district is responsible for developing a set of learning objectives that must be approved at the state level. Teachers administer pretests based on these objectives and then design and implement lesson plans covering these learning goals. Students are given a posttest at the end of the course and their growth is determined by the increase in scores. Evaluators examine the scores and assign ratings accordingly.

The student survey component allows students to report their perceptions of their experiences in the classroom (GaDOE, 2014; NYCDOE, 2013). The surveys are computerized and totally anonymous, and students are asked only about the teachers they have. The questions address teacher practices in areas such as type of learning environment and difficulty of lessons. Schools are responsible for setting up and conducting the surveys, and the results are made accessible to teachers.

#### Focus School Status

The state in which the study took place is one of ten states receiving a waiver from the No Child Left Behind performance standards. Schools in these areas were exempted from accountability on statewide standardized tests with the stipulation that certain intervention strategies would be adopted. One condition of the waiver was that public schools be classified as priority, focus, or reward schools. Priority schools represent the lowest achieving 5% of schools, and Focus Schools represent the 10% above them (Washington, 2012). The school being studied was placed on the Focus School list in 2013.

Focus School classification is issued when a school has a graduation rate that is less than 60% of the student population for at least 2 years and performs poorly on state tests (Washington, 2012). Focus Schools may or may not have met Adequate Yearly Progress, but display disparaging differences among identified subgroups. These subgroups may be determined by race, socio-economic status, or special needs (Associated Press, 2012). The school must also receive Title I assistance, meaning that it serves predominantly low income students. Schools remain on the Focus School list for 3 years.

Focus Schools are named based on studies of achievement test scores over a 3-year period (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). The performance of the two lowest subgroups in each school is compared to the performance of the highest subgroup. The proficiency gap between this highest-performing subgroup and that of the two lowest-performing subgroups is determined, and a school with a proficiency gap of 43.47% or higher is named a Focus School. Focus Schools receive extensive state support for professional development opportunities and after school programs and must devise detailed school improvement plans within the first 3 months of being selected.

### Chapter III

#### METHODS

The purpose of this study was to observe the changing perceptions of school climate for educators as they experience a year of major alterations to their work environment. Through this study, I examined how teachers view the significance of working conditions in determining the climate of the institution and what factors are most essential in establishing a positive school climate. Participants were asked to discuss how they felt about the quality of the relationships they had with their students, peers, and superiors during the transition process.

The methods section discusses the theories and approaches that helped shape this qualitative case study. The case study approach is suitable for this research because its aim was to find “particularization, not generalization” (Stake, 1995, p. 8). This section also includes a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as an explanation of the strategies used for data collection and analysis.

#### Theoretical Framework

I initiated this study knowing that I would be not only the researcher, but also an active participant due to the fact that I was employed at the site where the research was being conducted. Therefore, my role could not be truly neutral; my personal background and experiences could potentially impact the research. Moreover, I did not approach the research with the intention of proving or disproving any preconceived conceptions. Interpretivism is designed to focus on the personal experiences of individuals and how



these events are perceived (Gerring, 2007). Interpretivists believe that each person builds his or her own reality based on individual interpretations of events and that this reality is highly subjective (Maxwell, 2005). Interpretivist research is also characterized by close relationships between the researcher and the participants with the researcher attempting to understand the thoughts and actions of subjects by considering how they are impacted by their unique points of view (Merriam, 2002). The nature of this research paradigm was conducive to the nature of my study, and, therefore, I based my theoretical framework on interpretivism.

My interpretive case study was designed to be inductive, generating theory through the analysis of emerging data (Creswell, 2009). I sought to understand the events and actions being studied as well as how the participants made sense of these experiences (Maxwell, 2005). Viewing the situation through an interpretive lens required that I draw conclusions and make assumptions about why people do the things they do. The process involved establishing rather than uncovering meaning, and my ultimate goal was to “understand behavior from the actor’s point of view” (Gerring, 2007, p. 71), even if that reality seemed to conflict with normal patterns of thought.

Reality lies in the eye of the beholder. Each individual develops a set of beliefs based on his or her personal experiences, and this creation of unique realities fosters multiple truths. Given my interest in researching the perceptions of educators, I reasoned that an interpretivist approach would be best for understanding teachers’ views on the issue of school climate. As I interviewed my participants I fully expected their responses to differ according to their previous experiences, but also to correlate based on their shared current circumstances.

Educators employed at a newly established middle school in a small rural community were included in this study. The experiences of these teachers relating to the perceived overall climate of the school were explored. Considering the topic under investigation, I decided that a qualitative case study would best serve my purpose. Qualitative research assumes that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3) and allows the researcher to ascertain individual’s personal feelings in relation to the phenomena being studied. Qualitative inquiry traces progress and change over time as perceived by the participants and is instrumental in identifying policies or procedures in need of reform (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative approaches are useful when the phenomena being studied are dynamic and not clearly defined, such as feelings of trust, safety, and connectedness and tend to analyze a particular event from multiple perspectives without prejudice (Creswell, 2003). Using a qualitative approach allowed me, the researcher, to act as the primary *instrument* and to use my observations and personal interactions with the participants to interpret the data collected and to build understandings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

I chose a case study approach because the participants have shared a unique experience, each perceiving it in an individual manner. Case studies are heuristic and require the researcher to observe a situation and analyze it to draw conclusions (Ellet, 2007). This method allowed me to interact directly with the environment and to capture the characteristics of a small group in order to learn something about the entire community (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I was also able to incorporate my own thoughts and feelings about what I was seeing into the research.

Research on school climate also influenced my case study. The National School Climate Council (2007) developed a framework of standards to support positive school climates. The standards call for practices such as establishing mission statements and shared goals for the school community, creating a learning environment that is welcoming and secure for all community members, and that all stakeholders are valued and treated fairly. Three major areas were recognized as pivotal to the status of school climate: safety, relationships, and the physical environment (Gangi, 2009). The condition and changes of these factors as perceived by the participants were assessed throughout the study.

#### Overview of Procedures

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants. Most of the interviews took place in the interviewees' classrooms. One interview was conducted in the school gym. Two interviews were conducted with the participants, the first being an informal discussion about their backgrounds and teaching philosophies, as well as a review of the purpose of the study and their role in the process. The second interview was designed to address the issues and circumstances impacting the participants' perceptions of the condition of the school's climate. The interviews were conducted over a 2-month period and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. I transcribed the interview responses within 1 to 2 days of the interview. A third meeting was held and participants were given the opportunity to look over their responses and discuss any disagreements over the meanings of either the questions or the answers. Any alterations were written directly on the transcription and later corrected within the document.

Field observations were recorded on observation sheets with columns for observations and impressions. Notes on documentary information and records were also compiled using these observation sheets. Similar to the interview data, the field notes were transcribed within 1 to 2 days.

Working with the gathered data was an ongoing process that began during interviews and field observations and continued into the periods of time that I silently reflected on the information I had accumulated. I read through individual interview transcripts three times, each time identifying particular text segments that seemed relevant. I then read through all the responses to individual interview questions to find similarities in participant responses across all the data sets. This process was repeated after each interview. Throughout the study, I used my theoretical framework to guide my analyses of the gathered data, eventually distinguishing a set of basic codes. These codes are discussed more closely in Chapter 4.

### Setting

The proposed study was conducted at a first year rural middle school in the Southeast. More than 16,000 citizens reside in the county, and the population has witnessed a steady increase over the past 10 years due to its close proximity to a growing military base (Boatright, 2013). Approximately 30% of the population is African American and 12% are Hispanic or Latino. Twenty-one percent of the population report household incomes below the poverty level, and according to the 2009 American Community Survey, more than 16% of the population resided in single parent homes (ProximityOne, 2014).

The location of this case study, referred to as Little County, operates four public schools including one lower elementary school, one intermediate school, one middle school, and one high school. There are more than 2,500 students, 48% of which are minority. All schools receive Title I funding, and approximately 66% of the students are considered to be economically disadvantaged and receive free lunch. The high school graduation rate is around 40%, including those receiving a GED (Boatright, 2013).

The study targeted the newly established middle school, which serves almost 700 students. Prior to the 2013 school year, this middle school housed grades 4 – 8 and shared resources such as lunch facilities and a media center with the high school. This year, however, the middle school split into two separate schools, one serving fourth and fifth grades and one serving sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The county also opened a new high school facility. The middle school relocated to the building formerly used for the high school, parts of which are over 65 years old. The middle school still shares the cafeteria and media center with the intermediate school.

The research site, referred to as Wilbur Middle School, employs 27 regular education teachers: nine in the sixth grade, eight in the seventh grade, and ten in the eighth grade. In addition, there are also five special education teachers and nine exploratory teachers who are responsible for teaching enrichment courses such as art, music, and computer skills. There are eight male teachers and five African American teachers, and 23 of the teachers have been teaching for at least 10 years. The school also employs 12 teachers who hold a Master's degree and two who hold Education Specialist degrees. Most of the teachers are residents of neighboring counties who commute each day.

The administrative staff consists of one male principal and one female vice principal. The principal, who resides in a neighboring county, is beginning his second year as the head administrator, although he served 5 years as vice principal before acquiring his current position. The vice principal is a native of the county and is serving her first year. The school also employs two female instructional coordinators who share some of the administrative duties and serve as curriculum coaches in two subject areas. The first coordinator is responsible for math and science and has been in her position for 7 years. The other coordinator is responsible for language arts and social studies and was hired for the position this year. Both are veteran teachers employed by the school system for over 10 years. The staff also includes six paraprofessionals, two secretaries, one counselor, one nurse, and two migrant specialists responsible for interpreting for individual students and during parent conferences. The nurse, exploratory teachers, and instructional coordinators divide their time between the middle school and the intermediate school.

The sixth, seventh, and eighth grades at Wilbur Middle School have achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the past 8 years with standardized test scores comparable to state averages (Boatright, 2013). However, although the school's overall test averages have been consistently satisfactory, some of the subgroups have exhibited markedly lower scores than their peers, most notably the special education subgroup. Special education students make up approximately 9% of the student population, and 2011 standardized test scores for this group indicated a 70% failure rate in mathematics and a 60% failure rate in reading at the middle school level (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011).

Due to the incongruence between the test scores of regular education students and those of the special education students, the state has placed Wilbur Middle School on the list of Focus Schools for its state. Focus School standing signifies that a school displays substantial performance gaps, calling into question the school's procedures for addressing the needs of diverse subgroups. These subgroups may be categorized by race, socio-economic status, or special needs.

Focus School standing requires that the school initiate certain programs to address identified areas of need. These interventions include remediation opportunities for struggling students during and after school. Teachers are required to participate in professional development courses and to adhere to strict guidelines when developing lesson plans and defining differentiation strategies. The school is also responsible for creating a viable school improvement plan specifying the measures being implemented.

In addition to being named a Focus School, and having a new grade configuration, the middle school has been experiencing other changes. Although the middle school is newly established, the facility is outdated and the classrooms are much smaller than those that many of the teachers previously had. The campus is very spread out, and some of the classrooms are quite isolated from the common areas such as the cafeteria and media center. Some of the rooms have water leaks and poor heating and cooling provisions.

Another issue for this middle school is the reorganization of the teaching staff. Over half of the staff has been moved to different grade levels or subject areas, or, in some cases, both. The three grade levels have differing numbers of teachers based on the number of students enrolled, and many of the teachers are now required to teach more

than one subject area. Exploratory teachers are asked to divide their time between the intermediate school and the middle school, visiting the lower grades in the morning and the upper grades in the afternoon. The instructional coordinators are housed at the intermediate school but also serve the middle school.

### Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized in the selection of participants from the various employees at the school. Purposeful selection is advantageous in that it allows the researcher to adequately represent a set of individuals while also capturing the diversity within the group (Maxwell, 2005). The focus of purposeful sampling is to gain “in-depth understanding” (Patton, 2002, p. 46) of a particular phenomenon to gain the most vivid portrayal of the setting being studied.

For my study, I chose participants who could give me a variety of perspectives. Decisions regarding participant selection were based on the research questions and the purpose of the study. The persons included were able to contribute credible and pertinent information about the subject being observed (Sargeant, 2012). In accordance with basic case study design, I included a small group of participants (Ellet, 2007).

The participants in my case study included seven regular education teachers: three with 5 to 10 years of experience, and four with more than 10 years of experience. I selected teachers who had been employed with Little County for 5 or more years so that the participants would have a solid background with the school before its transition to a middle school. The educational backgrounds of the members ranged from Bachelor's Degrees to an Education Specialist Degree. The study also included one exploratory



teacher and one special education teacher, and each grade level and content area was represented. Chapter 4 includes a brief profile of each participant.

#### Possible Types and Sources of Information or Data

Qualitative data tells a story that “captures and communicates someone else’s experience of the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Yin (2009) suggested six basic sources of data for qualitative case study research: documentation, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, archival records, and physical artifacts. Each source has its own strengths and weaknesses, and all sources may or may not be incorporated into a study. However, when used properly, the diverse resources can be complementary and help to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For my study, I relied on three main sources: interviews, observations, and documentation.

Interviewing was the main source of data collection during my case study. Qualitative interviews are one of the most important sources of data in case study research, and such interviews are often flexible in structure and invite the interviewee to be an active maker of meaning rather than a mere respondent (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Yin, 2009). Interviews are essential to qualitative research because of the focus on human behaviors and interactions. Interviews may be unstructured, semi-structured, or highly structured. Unstructured interviews involve allowing the interviewee to help direct the content discussed, whereas structured interviews depend on a predetermined set of questions. Case studies often incorporate various modes of interviewing at different stages of the research (Patton, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews were my main source of data. The questions I asked related to the participants’ upbringing and prior working experiences, to their current

working experiences, and their changes in perceptions of their circumstances. I started the interviews with a list of preset questions, but I made allowances for topics emerging during the sessions (Merriam, 2002) (see Appendix A). My questions were open-ended so that participants were able to use their own words and, therefore, feel more comfortable during the interview. Interviews were conducted individually in various locations and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Follow-up conferences were conducted to clarify previous responses and to give the interviewees the opportunity to review and revise their answers.

The purpose of observation is to “take the reader into the setting that was observed” (Patton, 2002, p. 23). Direct observation offers a non-intrusive mode of collecting research data and is conducted in the natural setting rather than in a controlled environment. The researcher observes actions and behaviors without actively taking part in the events being observed. The observer should describe the situation factually and thoroughly without clouding it with irrelevant information (Patton, 2002).

I used direct observation at various times during the research in order to support the themes and ideas that emerged from my interviews. I attended various meetings and school sponsored events, such as faculty meetings, grade level meetings, subject area meetings, and sports activities. My observations were recorded on a field data sheet and kept in a journal (see Appendix B).

Documents come in a variety of formats. Personal documents, such as letters, journals, and e-mails, may be considered in the course of a study (Yin, 2009). Written reports of public events such as agendas or meeting minutes may also be evaluated. Internal records, such as progress reports and attendance summaries are also examples of

documentation. These types of data often offer substantial background information for the researcher, opening new possibilities for the direction of the research (Patton, 2002). Yin (2009) stated that the most constructive use of document analysis is to justify and substantiate the research findings.

Yin (2009) specified several reasons to utilize document analysis in case study research. Documents present an inexpensive and stable source of information that may be reviewed repeatedly at different points of the study. Documents, such as the minutes of grade level or subject area meetings, are also “unobtrusive” (Yin, 2009, p. 102) in that they are separate from the study and do not interfere with the process. Moreover, they offer a broad depiction of the events and settings and how they have evolved over time. Limitations of document use include difficulty of accessing the data and researcher bias in the selection of documentation. However, this data source allows the researcher to examine information from the past in order to better understand the events of the present.

I incorporated document analysis in my case study. Demographic information on the residents and students was used to provide an adequate background for the reader, and internal survey results, test scores, and personnel information were also examined. Memos and e-mail messages from administration and state agencies were collected and analyzed to establish an ongoing interpretation of the context of the study and to track changes and commonalities in performance and mindsets.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a cyclical and ongoing process that begins as soon as data is collected rather than after data collection has ceased (Stake 1995). Jorgensen (1989) described qualitative analysis as:

a breaking up, separating, or disassembling of research materials into pieces, parts, elements, or units. With facts broken down into manageable pieces, the researcher sorts and sifts them, searching for types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes. The aim of this process is to assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion (p. 107).

The insights of the researcher serve as components of both fieldwork and analysis (Patton, 2002). Findings which surface during the research directly impact what types of data will be subsequently collected and how they are collected. The data collected is comprised of interview records, fieldwork notes, and references to informal conversations.

Jorgensen (1989) suggested three phases of qualitative data analysis: noticing, collecting, and thinking. Noticing refers to the breaking up, separating, and disassembling of data into smaller parts. Collecting involves sorting and shifting the information into logical categories, and thinking requires that the researcher look for types, processes, or patterns. The aim of these three phases is to assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful way.

I continuously analyzed my data as it was gathered, categorizing the results of my interviews and observations initially in terms of the research questions. More detailed categories were developed as the study proceeded. I analyzed my information by comparing the responses of different interviewees as well as comparing the answers of consecutive interviews for each participant. I also categorized my field observations and analyzed how they related to the interview responses.

Patton (2002) stated that the development of a practical coding system should be the first step of analysis. Often, the observer has some codes already in mind before the study begins and adds other ideas that seem to arise out of the data. This method of data collection depends upon *a priori* codes which may be based on established theories, research proposal topics, or planned interview questions (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010). During the coding process I examined the raw qualitative data and assigned labels to key ideas or events. I began with a set of broad codes and branched out into more explicit subcategories as I observed common patterns or themes arise. I continuously revisited information collected during observations and interviews, identifying and recording prevalent areas of interest. Segments of data were marked with symbols, descriptive words, or distinctive labels. This process of *open coding* allowed the data to determine the direction of the study (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Data collected later were then compared against the set of codes and evaluated for new ideas. After accumulating a substantial number of codes, I sought to find relationships between the codes and sorted them into broader categories.

I utilized constant comparison during my case study, an inductive procedure requiring the researcher to examine the data and formulate theories (Fram, 2013). Constant comparison is conducive to studies aiming to examine general characteristics of a targeted group or setting (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). I repeatedly compared new data to previous findings with similar codes, and the data were consistently revisited until new categories no longer emerged. This allowed me to identify both similarities and differences in the findings and to both validate and dismiss proposed theories based in the new data (Fram, 2013).

## Validity

Trustworthiness refers to how accurately the documented research conveys the intent of the participants (Maxwell, 2005). Trustworthy research is conducted in such a way as to maintain an outlined purpose without altering or manipulating the information gathered. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research by developing four distinct criteria to establish the trustworthiness of a study. These areas include confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability.

### *Confirmability*

Qualitative research is based on human design, and, therefore, is subject to bias. The concept of confirmability addresses the concern that the outlooks and experiences of the informants rather than the ideas or beliefs of the researcher are reflected (Creswell, 2008). Ensuring confirmability relies on the ability of the researcher to openly acknowledge any predispositions influencing the methods and approaches taken to conduct the study (Miles & Huberman, 2013). I incorporated ongoing reflexive evaluations in the study to ensure awareness of my possible prejudices and how they may have affected the process and outcomes. I also utilized triangulation, the method of incorporating a variety of data sources in order to offer multiple supports for the themes emerging (Patton, 2002). My data was gathered from multiple respondents and in various forms including interviews, detailed field observations, and document reviews and continuously compared (Patton, 2002). I also used member checks to ensure that my interpretations of interviews and informal conversations were depicted in the way they were intended (Creswell, 2008).

### *Credibility*

Credibility refers to the accuracy of a study from the participants' perspectives and whether it measures what is expected (Merriam, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (2005) identified credibility as a main source in establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. I verified and maintained the credibility of the study by routinely reviewing and discussing responses with the participants to ensure that I had conveyed their thoughts in the manner intended.

Although every qualitative study has unique design components, incorporating established methods may help to preserve the integrity of the study (Yin, 2009). My data collection was based on methods utilized successfully during previous studies, such as semi-structured interviews and open coding (Maxwell, 2005). I continuously analyzed the data based on my extensive literature review to foster objectivity in interpretations (Patton, 2002).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also stressed the importance of maintaining an ongoing relationship between those being studied and those doing the studying to ensure credibility. Building a sense of familiarity and comfort heightens the probability that participants will be forthcoming and genuine in their interviews and interactions. I had established positive professional and personal relationships with the participants prior to the case study and was well acquainted with the setting itself. The interview process went smoothly with the participants being very forthcoming and I felt comfortable and welcomed when conducting my observations.

My study was subject to continuous participant and researcher review. I included multiple member checks throughout the research to gauge accuracy and to expound upon

developed themes. By following up with the participants, I was able to ensure that I had recorded our conversations accurately and that I had properly conveyed the responses to the reader. I documented my initial impressions during interviews and during field observations. I revisited these notes often throughout the research, keeping a reflective journal to document my own changing outlooks as the study progressed.

### *Dependability*

Quantitative studies employ standard measures to establish that findings are replicable (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research, however, is often tailored to fit the particular study being conducted; there may, or may not, be components that are similar to those of other studies. Therefore, the tools of qualitative inquiry must often be scrutinized in isolation. Dependability is a measurement of the reliability and consistency of a researcher's practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Demonstrating dependability requires that the researcher be transparent throughout each stage of the investigation (Patton, 2002). The researcher's choices of instruments and selection of participants should be clearly explained, and the setting should be portrayed in such detail that the reader may repeat the process, even if the results are not the same. Clear and precise descriptions allow the reader to determine the applicability of the study to their own situations.

I employed the use of an audit trail documenting how the research was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of the audit trail was to provide a comprehensive description of the research including notes about the context of the study, methodological decisions, data analysis procedures, and my own self-awareness. The audit also detailed changes in research processes and why these alterations were warranted (Shenton, 2004).



I also enlisted a code-recode approach to the data analysis phase, meaning that my data were coded as they were collected and recoded after a set amount of time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process helped me ensure that my interpretations of the information collected were consistent. Miles and Huberman (1994) specified the need to recode data until there is at least a 90% correlation between the findings of current collections to the findings of previous collections.

### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the level of similarity between the research situation and the situation of the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability does not involve broad generalizations, but invites readers to transfer pertinent elements of a study to their own experiences. The responsibility of the researcher is to provide enough information to allow the reader to judge the applicability of the study to other contexts, and rich, detailed descriptions are critical for determining transferability (Shenton, 1994). My study clearly outlined the background of the research. I took extensive measures to ensure the reader received a thorough perception of the situation and its unique circumstances by describing areas such as where the study was based, the data collection process, and a comprehensive description of the participants.

### *Limitations of the Study*

This study was conducted in a single school system and, therefore, may not be representative of all the state school systems. This particular school district is quite small in respect to others around the state and is marked by a large number of economically disadvantaged students. The transferability of the findings may be called into question due to the unique characteristics of the school being studied.

The researcher of this study was an employee at the middle school being examined and worked daily with the intended participants. I had known most of the teachers interviewed for many years and had previously served on the same team with two of these teachers. Therefore, my relationship with the participants may have influenced responses and results.

Characteristic of most qualitative research incorporating interviews, the results of this study were dependent upon the honesty and integrity of the participants. The purpose of the research was clearly conveyed at the onset of the study and, although the I did not lean in any particular direction, I may have perceived that certain results would be more desirable than others. The participants may have altered their responses to meet these perceived aims of the study.

#### Ethical Concerns

Good research should be driven by honesty and authenticity. The researcher should take measures to ensure a principled and impartial study (Yin, 2009). Patton (2002) offered a comprehensive checklist of ethical issues to be considered when conducting a qualitative study. These issues include gaining informed consent from participants, protecting the confidentiality of participants, avoiding deceptive practices when designing the research, and giving participants the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Anonymity was a major priority during my research, and, therefore, both the school and the county were given pseudonyms. Demographic information was obtained from national data bases rather than state or local sites (Gallup Organization, 2012; NCES, 2012; USDA, 2012). The names of all participants were kept confidential, and

each participant was number coded to ensure that interview and observation results would not be compromised.

For my case study, all of the participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines stipulated by Patton as well as those specified by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix C). I obtained informed consent by all participants in my study prior to conducting any interviews. The interviewees were fully informed about the nature of the study and how it would be conducted. Participants had their rights clearly explained to them, and all participants were ensured the ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were given access to the transcripts of interviews and observations to ensure that there was no deception or misunderstanding in my interpretations. Each participant was also given the opportunity to reconsider and retract any statement and to clarify any misinterpretations.

### Summary

This chapter explained the research design used for this qualitative study. A case study was utilized to examine the developing perceptions of staff members in a small rural school transitioning to a middle grades configuration. The research also highlighted the impact that additional stressors, such as Focus School status and teaching multiple subjects, have on the perceptions of school climate. Voluntary participants engaged in individual interviews to discuss perceptions of school climate factors such as safety, quality of relationships, and physical working conditions.

I gathered qualitative data during interviews, extensive field observations, and informal conversations with various stakeholders. Document reviews also provided

supplementary information relevant to the context and circumstances of the study. Data were gathered and analyzed using a constant comparative method and themes were established based on the findings. The data were then coded in accordance with the structure of the emerging themes and patterns, and the results were analyzed using an interpretive approach to draw attention to similar codes and to establish which themes were predominant in the results. Measurements were also taken to ensure the overall trustworthiness of the study. Validity issues were addressed using various techniques such as triangulation and member checks.

## Chapter IV

### FINDINGS

This study was designed to examine the perceptions of school climate by middle school teachers undergoing a series of professional and emotional changes during a transition to a new school setting. My research utilized a case study approach by focusing on a small group of teachers in order to develop a deeper understanding of the entire school community. I referred to interpretivism and school climate research as the basis for my theoretical framework. Data were collected mainly through semi-structured interviews with a group of middle school teachers purposely chosen based upon both their past experience and their current positions. Other methods of data collection included field observations conducted at the study site and various document reviews. The data were analyzed using an open coding system and constant comparison to identify and prioritize emerging patterns or themes.

As the researcher, I played the role of a participant observer, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the context of the study. I used the original research questions to guide the study:

1. How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?

3. What factors do middle school teachers perceive to be most important to developing a positive school climate?

These questions were addressed using the data obtained through interviews and participant observations. The results are presented as a set of themes related to each research question.

### Participant Profiles

Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collected during my study. I conducted interviews with nine participants purposely selected based on their teaching backgrounds. This section provides a brief overview of the participant group collectively followed by an individual profile of each member. The purpose of these descriptions is to provide the reader with a sufficient awareness of the backgrounds and circumstances of the participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of the thoughts and feelings that guided each interviewee during the study.

All nine participants were middle school teachers. Each grade level and each content area was represented by at least one participant, and ages ranged from 27 to 68 with the majority of the group being between 30 and 40 years old. Three of the teachers had been teaching for 5 to 10 years, and the rest had been teaching more than 10 years. Five of the members possess a Master's Degree, and one holds an Education Specialist Degree. Two of the interviewees were male, and six of the teachers resided outside of Little County. Table 1 displays a general description of the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Descriptions*

Participant	Male or Female?	Yrs.	Education	Teaching Philosophy Quotation
Mrs. Universal	Female	16	B.S. Middle Grades	"I am firm, but fair. All students can perform; some just better than others. I expect that everybody I teach performs."
Mrs. Motivated	Female	10	B.S. Middle Grades, MEd Leadership, EdS Curriculum	"I am a <i>morals mama</i> . I teach the content, but I also teach the character."
Mr. Popular	Male	6	B.S. in Geology, MEd Inst.Tech.	"Practice what you preach. I believe that I have to like what I'm doing if I expect my students to like it."
Mrs. Nogray	Female	22	B.S. Middle Grades	"I care about my students, but I am not here to make them like me. I am here to teach Science."
Mrs. Leanonme	Female	24	B.S. Middle Grades, MEd Leadership	"Teaching in itself is a gift. A good teacher can teach anything because she knows how to get through to the students."
Mrs. Feelgood	Female	20	B.S. Middle Grades	"Teaching is my job. I come here and do as good a job as I can, but I have to accept that there is only so much I can do. We can't save the world."
Mr. Nonsense	Male	20	B.S. Middle Grades	"Structure and clear expectations are necessary for good instruction."
Mrs. Dedication	Female	24	B.S. Middle Grades, MEd Inst. Tech.	"Let them know that they matter. Be interested in them and what they want to accomplish."
Mrs. Girlfromhere	Female	8	B.S. in Accounting	"No two students are the same. My job is to determine what success means."

The following participant profiles are based on the information collected through interviews and informal conversations. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. All participants were asked to view their profiles and give their approval before being incorporated into the study.

*Mrs. Universal*

Mrs. Universal has been teaching in Little County for 16 years and has a Bachelor's Degree in Middle Grades Education. She is in her mid-thirties and resides in a neighboring county, but has spent her entire career in Little County. Mrs. Universal has two children who attend school in her home county. Although she has been offered several positions in her home district, Mrs. Universal prefers to work in a location where she is not pressured to make professional decisions based on personal relationships. "Everybody knows everybody and everybody thinks you should pull strings for them. I work here and I don't have that problem."

Mrs. Universal is unique in that she is considered to be highly qualified in all four content areas. Such credentials would appear to be an asset, but her versatility has made her vulnerable to frequent changes in placement. Over the course of her career she has taught all three grade levels and three of the four content areas. This year she was moved into an exploratory position designed to remediate students in math and language arts. As an exploratory teacher, her teaching schedule is divided between the intermediate school and the middle school. She described her job in terms of peer relationships, "My new position forces me to interact with other teachers in a whole new way. Before I was only tight with the teachers on my grade level. Now I see and talk to almost everyone."



When asked about her teaching philosophy, Mrs. Universal indicated that she believes education is as much about discipline as it is subject matter. She described herself as “firm, but fair” and indicated that she expected every student to perform. She stated, “I want all students to get the best education they can. I try not to have any bias beforehand towards any student, regardless of their learning styles, behaviors, outside problems, or anything else.” She also specified that she believes in rewarding hard work and regularly recognizing individual students for their achievements. For instance, she has a *90 and Up* contest each week in which she rewards any of her students who have consistently scored at least a 90 % on all of their assignments for the week.

Mrs. Universal views school climate as the attitudes of the teachers and students attending. She feels that school climate is not a fixed condition and may change from day to day. She reflected, “I think that the school climate is a result of how the teachers are feeling. The emotions of the staff set the vibe for the whole school. “Being exposed to both the intermediate school and the middle school, she pointed out that there was a distinct difference in school climate between the two schools, which she attributed to the contrasting leadership styles of the two principals.

*Mrs. Motivated*

Mrs. Motivated has spent all 10 years of her teaching career in Little County. She is also a resident of a neighboring county, but unlike Mrs. Universal, has chosen to enroll her children in Little County. She explained that she felt more comfortable having her children in a smaller, more close-knit environment. “I like knowing that every grown up in the school knows who my kids are, even though sometimes it’s for the wrong reasons,” she stated jokingly.

Mrs. Motivated holds a Bachelor's Degree in Middle Grades Education, a Master's Degree in Education, and a Specialist Degree in Curriculum. She is also considering returning to school to complete her Doctorate. Mrs. Motivated has served on several committees and is actively involved in various student clubs and activities. She has been named Teacher of the Year and acted as grade chair for several years. Until this year she had always taught the same content area to the same age group, but at the time of the study had been moved to a different grade level.

Mrs. Motivated describes herself as a "morals mama." As an educator, she believes that she is responsible for not only teaching her students the required curriculum; she must also provide a solid example of what it means to be a good person. Her teaching philosophy is that emotional awareness is just as crucial to success as academic knowledge. She conveyed her feelings by saying, "I tell my boys [sons] every day that it doesn't matter how good they are at something; if they are not good inside, no one will see past that to admire their talents."

When I asked Mrs. Motivated how she would explain school climate, she replied that to her it was just the way a place makes you feel. "Some places make you feel cozy and secure, and some places make you feel like you shouldn't be touching the merchandise." She spoke of a school she had visited for a professional development workshop, characterizing the atmosphere by saying that "the air was so thick that it weighed down on you." She also indicated that she believed school climate was heavily influenced by the administration.

### *Mr. Popular*

Mr. Popular has been teaching at Wilbur Middle School for 6 years. His original degree was in Geology, and he began his teaching career on a provisional basis as he completed his education courses. Mr. Popular has taught the same subject at the same grade level for all 6 years, and he is certified only in this area. However, he has recently completed his master's degree in Instructional Technology.

Mr. Popular is the teacher everyone wants and many parents specifically request him each year. Mr. Popular is loved by both the students and the teachers and the admiration seems to stem not only from the energetic way he teaches, but also from his genuine affection for his students and his willingness to show it. This teacher is involved in multiple extracurricular activities and community outreach projects. He is admired by his peers, with one teacher describing him by saying that, "he is here for the right reason."

Mr. Popular also travels abroad each summer to volunteer for youth programs in underdeveloped areas. Speaking briefly about his travels, Mr. Popular commented, "You would never believe the giant difference between here and there. The kids there would walk ten miles for the chance to go to school."

Mr. Popular's teaching philosophy is to lead by example. He believes that students will only become excited about a given topic if the teacher himself is excited about it, and, therefore, the teacher should strive to display a genuine connection to the content and to convey a deep appreciation of the subject. You have to "practice what you preach."

According to Mr. Popular, this type of attitude is contagious, and his standardized test scores have reflected his enthusiastic approach to the subject matter. Mr. Popular views school climate as the overall personality of the school. The teachers and students are the components of this personality, and it is a compilation of their strengths and weaknesses. The climate is positive when the school is made up of “upbeat” members, but can be easily damaged by pessimism and disrespect.

*Mrs. Nogray*

Mrs. Nogray has been teaching in Little County for 22 years and plans to retire next year. Before becoming a teacher, she spent 5 years working as a substitute teacher and 2 years as a paraprofessional. Prior to that, she worked in construction. Mrs. Nogray holds a Bachelor’s degree in Middle Grades Science and Social Studies and was the first of her family to graduate high school and college.

Over the years, Mrs. Nogray has served as both grade chair and content leader, and was once featured as “Top Teacher” on a local news television show. She taught eighth grade science for most of her career, but was transferred to a sixth grade science position 5 years ago. This year she was asked to teach both science and social studies.

Mrs. Nogray could be adequately described as old fashioned. She believes there should be a “definite line drawn” between the status of teachers and students. Though students should look to the teacher for guidance and support, they should never be comfortable enough to think of the teacher as a friend. She reflected, “I grew up saying yes ma’am and no ma’am. Now I’ve reached the point where I should have those things said to me.”

Mrs. Nogray incorporates group work and games in her lessons, but she insists that her role is not to make school fun and that students need to realize that acquiring an education is just something they have to do. “Somewhere along the way somebody decided that these kids are supposed to be entertained,” she stated, adding that what they really need is to understand that many of the tasks they encounter, especially as they join the workforce, will not provide a lot of excitement.

The climate of a school is most shaped by the leadership according to Mrs. Nogray. The administrators set the tone for their teachers, who, in turn, set the tone for their students. Good climates are established by leaders who are fair and consistent. Poor climates are created by leaders who are “wishy-washy” and show marked favoritism among their staff.

*Mrs. Leanonme*

Mrs. Leanonme has been teaching for 24 years, but was a latecomer, spending many years as a stay-at-home mom before completing her teaching degree. Mrs. Leanonme holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Grades Education and a Master’s Degree in Leadership. She worked in a neighboring county for 11 years before coming to Little County, where she has been teaching for 10 years. Mrs. Leanonme has always taught at the seventh grade level, but this year was asked to teach two subject areas, one of which she had never previously taught. She was very uneasy about this, commenting that, “I’m not sure how to teach any of this [the new content]. It makes me feel like a first year teacher. They [the students] have to see it.”

Over the years, Mrs. Leanonme has been named Teacher of the Year and has served as grade chair. To her fellow teachers, Mrs. Leanonme is considered the

backbone of the grade level and tends to be the person sought out for moral support and professional guidance. Mrs. Leanonme is described as easily approachable and exceptionally sympathetic to both her co-workers and her students and has earned recognition and respect from her superiors at both the school and the district level, being referred to by the principal as “one of our finest.”

Mrs. Leanonme views teaching as a calling. Teachers teach because “it’s what they are supposed to do.” She believes teaching is more about the communication than the content. Mrs. Leanonme insists that teaching itself is a skill that not everyone has, and a good teacher can teach anything because he or she has the gift of making others understand. She recognizes that she possesses the teaching talent and has learned to appreciate her mission. To her there is no greater feeling than having a student look at her and say “Oh! I get it now!”

School climate, according to Mrs. Leanonme, is “the overall attitude of the teachers, students, and administrators” of a school. These attitudes are influenced by many factors, such as the day-to-day activities and established procedures, and one group’s attitude just naturally affects the attitudes of the other groups. If the kids are having “full moon fever,” then you can see it all over the teachers and even the cafeteria workers. She also feels that the professional policies and institutional regulations greatly affect school climate, as noted with her statement, “When you don’t have textbooks, but you are being told you make too many copies, then the climate tends to take a nose dive.”

*Mrs. Feelgood*

Mrs. Feelgood has been teaching for 20 years, half of which have been in Little County. Before becoming a teacher she worked in the admissions office of a local

hospital. She has a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree in Middle Grades Education and comes from a long background of teachers, both her mother and grandmother are also educators. She taught only Language Arts until this year, when she was asked to teach both Language Arts and Social Studies.

Positive energy exudes from Mrs. Feelgood. She always has a smile on her face and something good-humored to say. When asked to describe her teaching philosophy, Mrs. Feelgood explained that teaching is what she "does," not who she "is." Mrs. Feelgood enjoys her work and strives to do a good job, but she has learned to put it down at the end of the day and step into her role as wife and mother. "We can't save the world. As teachers, we come here and do as much as we can. If we always worry about what is not done, we would just drive ourselves slap crazy."

Mrs. Feelgood sees school climate as a reflection of the level of trust and support between students, teachers, and administrators. Good climates occur when everyone is willing to listen to the concerns of others and when school leaders are open and honest with their staff. Negative climates result from a failure to recognize and value the needs and concerns of others. She shared her feelings, "I don't like for things to happen to me without me knowing they are happening. That's how school climates get negative."

#### *Mr. Nononsense*

Mr. Nononsense, who resides in a neighboring county, is in his final year of teaching. He has spent the last 20 years in the classroom, but also served 30 years in the military prior to that. Mr. Nononsense holds a Bachelor's Degree in Middle Grades Education and has always taught in the same content area. He originally taught at the fifth grade level, but was moved to the eighth grade 7 years ago because his teaching

requirements were deemed to be too demanding for younger students. “They just told me ‘Mr. Nononsense, you scare the kids.’ They didn’t seem scared to me. Scared of the work, maybe.” Indeed, Mr. Nononsense is known for his high expectations and his “bell to bell” teaching. Some parents request that their children not be placed in his class due to the workload, but far more ask for him for the same reason. One student commented that if you were in Mr. Nononsense’s class “you can’t help but learn something.”

Mr. Nononsense’s teaching philosophy is heavily influenced by his military experience, and to him discipline and structure are fundamental to effective instruction. He believes that students must be properly trained on what is expected from them and that what is expected stays the same each day. “You have to teach them what is required. They have to learn how to pay attention. They have to learn how to enter and exit the room.” There is far less wasted time and off task behavior if the students walk in knowing the routine. Mr. Nononsense’s class runs like clockwork with few discipline problems.

Mr. Nononsense’s perspective on school climate mirrors his beliefs about his own classroom, and he believes that school climate is a reflection of a school’s overall organization. If the school is operated with clear and consistent guidelines, the climate will be one of calmness and satisfaction. School members will know what they are expected to do and how they are supposed to do it. However, if the guiding principles change from day to day or situation to situation, teachers become confused and frustrated and the climate of the entire school deteriorates. The ultimate job of administration is to ensure the establishment of a comfortable working environment.



### *Mrs. Dedication*

Mrs. Dedication has been teaching in Little County for 24 years and has always resided in the community. She spent the first 15 years as a Special Education teacher, but moved to a Language Arts class to get a change. She explained the move by stating, “I co-taught for a couple of years, and I began to see that all the students struggled. I decided that I could do more good in a regular classroom.” This year she is actually teaching two subject areas, Language Arts and Social Studies. Mrs. Dedication possesses a Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Grades Education and a Master’s Degree in Instructional Technology. She was named Teacher of the Year last year and has served on several school boards and teacher committees.

Teaching means everything to Mrs. Dedication, and she is known for staying at school until dinnertime and can be seen at almost every extracurricular activity. Mrs. Dedication insists on eating lunch at the tables with her students each day, offers tutoring after school, and has even been known to have weekend classes when the time for standardized testing draws near. She stays in close contact with parents and often writes little notes of encouragement to her students. Mrs. Dedication’s commitment is even more remarkable considering the fact that she has just recently overcome a life threatening illness. She commented on her struggle by saying, “I really think that my sickness made me more mindful of my job and my responsibility to these kids. I try not to forget that they are a big reason I fought so hard.”

“Be interested in them” is the golden rule for Mrs. Dedication. If you show your students that their thoughts and feelings are important to you and that you believe that their plans and goals are attainable, they will accept you and your instruction willingly.

She is a big believer in accentuating the positive, meaning that she tries very hard to recognize and acknowledge each student's strengths rather than focusing solely on their weaknesses. However, Mrs. Dedication also holds her students to a very high standard, insisting that they put forth a legitimate effort to achieve.

Mrs. Dedication sees school climate as the spirit of the school. A good climate is characterized by a strong team spirit with administrators supporting the teachers and the teachers supporting their students. Open communication and positive reinforcement ensure a good working environment. "We are supposed to be a family. We need to be able to lean on one another and trust each other when things get hard. Like now."

*Mrs. Girlfromhere*

Mrs. Girlfromhere is a native of Little County and has lived there all her life. Before teaching she worked as a bank secretary and an accountant. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Accounting and a Master's in Math Education. She has been teaching for 8 years at the middle school, but plans to move up to the high school next year.

As a long-time resident of the area, Mrs. Girlfromhere naturally has a close connection to the community and the people who live there. "Growing up I swore I was going to get out of this town. I made it for about two semesters, and then I was crazy homesick. I ended up right back here, married to a local boy." Now she knows most of the local families and their particular circumstances, and, therefore, she feels compelled to take each student "in context." Her belief is that part of her job is to "determine what success means for each individual child" and then help that student achieve it.

School climate is a highly political concept to Mrs. Girlfromhere. There are two levels, an outward appearance that is exhibited to parents and community members, and an underlying atmosphere that prevails daily in the school routine. School officials allocate most of their time trying to look good for visitors or official observers and often overlook the needs and frustrations of their staff. Teacher morale declines and the negativity often spills into the classroom.

### Analytic Approach

The purpose of this study was to examine the changing perceptions of teachers as they experience a series of professional changes during the transition to a new school. My objective was to identify factors relevant to the three research questions developed as reflected in the interview and observation data. Each interview was viewed as a single incident, meaning that each interview was considered individually in the analysis. Common themes were identified across the data with regard to addressing the research questions.

In addition to the interviews, I conducted five field observations that included two faculty meetings, one grade level meeting, and two subject area meetings. A field log was composed and results were used to reinforce interview results (see Appendix B). I also reviewed certain documents including minutes from school and Board meetings, the School Improvement Plan, and survey results and made notes of pertinent details. Both the field notes and the document data were also converted to word transcripts.

### Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves “making sense out of text and data...and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper

into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). I looked for patterns, themes, and dimensions in the data through analysis of the interviews and observations, coding of the data, and further analysis as themes and patterns emerged. These steps were taken in order to adequately describe the participants’ subjective experiences and views.

The data analysis process for this study began with a review of the data collected through interviews, observations, and informal conversations. I read through my notes at least three times to verify that I fully understood what was recorded and that the information was relevant to the study. The next step was to transcribe the information gathered so that it could be easily read during subsequent reviews and could be reorganized as needed.

### *Coding*

The first level of identification occurred during the initial review of each interview. After conducting the interviews, I read each transcript, analyzed the data, and then conducted open coding. *Open coding* utilizes a brainstorming technique described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (p. 160). In open coding, the researcher thoroughly reviews the data contained within the data set before beginning to group and label concepts. The process of coding is taking the raw data and pulling out concepts and then further developing these concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, searching for commonalities to establish themes.

After transcribing the data, I once again read over the notes from my observations and the responses from the interviews conducted. I divided the information

into sections, assigning specific codes to each section such as *small classroom* and *non-working power outlets*. Once I had accumulated several items, I began to merge the coded data into more general categories such as *building problems*. After thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts, observation field notes, and supplemental documentation, I had established a preliminary set of codes.

I repeated the coding process until my emergent codes became *saturated*, consistently demonstrating a repetition of codes already established. I then delineated the codes into a broader set of themes encompassing multiple codes. Finally, I linked the emergent themes to one or more of the three research questions. Table 2 displays the emergent themes for the research questions and the underlying codes for each theme.

Table 2

*Theme Matrix*

Theme	Underlying Codes
Q1. How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?	
The Middle School Challenge	Decreased sense of community, elimination of teaching teams, lack of organization, unfamiliar with curriculum changes, uncertain about procedures, limited space, open campus, outdated building, unhappy with new assignments, too many changes at once
The Middle School Advantage	Less crowding, age appropriate, better for discipline, better for activities, new relationships, better than “trailer park”

Q2. How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?

Stressful working conditions damage school climate.	Lack of space, open campus, outdated building, too spread out, poor communication, little collaboration time, lack of acknowledgement, strained relationships with administration, uncomfortable relationships with peers, uncertainty, lack of autonomy
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Q3. What factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate?

Trusting relationships are essential to developing a positive school climate.	Support, consistency, respect, communication, acknowledgement, familiarity
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### *Validity, Trustworthiness, and Reliability*

I ensured the validity, trustworthiness, and reliability of the research study through employing various mechanisms. Qualitative validity, according to Creswell (2009), means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures. Validation of findings in qualitative research occurs throughout the research process. I incorporated a continual check during the coding process to ensure that coding did not drift from the original intent as the coding process evolved. I also developed a codebook to ensure consistency when coding the data. As only one researcher was responsible for analyzing the data, it was not necessary to cross check for intercoder agreement.

### *Results for Research Question 1*

Research Question 1 was *how does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?* After reviewing and comparing the collected data from my interviews and observations, I identified several codes directly related to this research

question. The codes included decreased feelings of community, the elimination of teaching teams, strained relationships with peers and administrators, a lack of organization and uncertainty about procedures, displeasure with new teaching assignments, and concern about the physical aspects of the new campus. Additionally, I identified a second set of codes including less crowding, better environment for school activities, more age appropriate, better for discipline, and better physical environment.

Going over the data several times and reconsidering the codes I had identified, I eventually concluded that my gathered information was representative of one overarching theme, the complexities that accompanied the establishment of the new middle school. As a result, the principal theme became “the middle school challenge.” Based on the second set of codes I identified, I also established a secondary theme, “the middle school advantage.” Both themes are discussed more thoroughly in the following sections.

### *The Middle School Challenge*

Over half of the participants indicated that they perceived a healthier school climate prior to the changeover to a middle school configuration, and all of the participants agreed that the transition to the new school included a significant amount of stress for everyone involved. Participants who indicated that the transition to a new school was challenging predominantly denoted uncertainty about new routines and procedures as the source of their confusion. Changing locations meant changing circumstances, and many of the problems arising were unforeseen and, therefore, had no pre-set plans of action. Mrs. Girlfromhere described the changeover in the following manner:

[The move] was rough but manageable. There were just so many changes all at once. Moving buildings, moving grade levels, moving subject areas. It was like starting over for a lot of us. You know how that is. Some do good with change. Some don't.

Mrs. Motivated expressed:

The move itself was a wild upheaval. So many of the procedures that were second nature for us immediately became major undertakings. I felt confused and dumb so often not knowing how to answer simple questions about where to go and when to be there. I was as lost as the kids most of the time.

Mr. Nononsense also shared, "Things were hectic and people had to get used to new routines," and Mrs. Dedication stated, "[It was] So stressful. There were just so many things coming at me at once."

Participants also distinguished the elimination of teaching teams as one of the contributing challenges during the transition to the middle school configuration. For some, the loss of team teaching preceded a drop in their perceptions of the school climate. Mrs. Leanonme explained her view on how the absence of teams affected the working environment:

I would have to say that the climate has changed for the worse since the transition. Before we moved here we had teaching teams. It was so much better. It was more unified and more organized when it came to discipline and planning and meeting with parents. Now we don't have teams anymore, and it is much harder to feel like we are working together. We don't know who's teaching who. This year has been one of the hardest for me.



When asked about the climate before the transition, Mr. Popular shared, “We had teams, which I loved. We seemed to work together well. There was a light heartedness that seems to be lacking now.”

Directly related to the team-teaching issue were participants’ perceptions that the school transition had a derogatory effect on the sense of community that had previously been established. “For instance,” Mr. Nononsense indicated, “It’s funny that before the move, I felt like we were more of a cohesive unit. We had more of a “family” thing going on. It’s not like that now.” Mrs. Dedication also expressed feelings of loss associated with the move:

[Before] It felt a lot closer. I know that I felt more bonded to the school and students before the move. I saw myself as a player in the successes and failures of the school. I felt like I had a vested interest in the school.

Mrs. Girlfromhere stated, “My relationships with my new peers were more work related [after the move]. It was just business. We just don’t seem to have time to bond. We just seem disconnected.”

Yet another challenge encountered by some teachers was being transferred to a new content area or a new grade level, or both. Those displaced tended to feel a certain amount of insecurity, and sometimes resentment, about their new position, especially if the move was not voluntary. For example, Mrs. Girlfromhere shared this story:

Well, several of our teachers were moved without being asked first. Some of them are veteran teachers who have been here for 10 or more years. One teacher left for summer thinking she would be teaching eighth grade social studies like she always had. She found out a few weeks later that she had moved to a

different grade level and would be teaching two subject areas. She had a meltdown. I can't blame her.

Mrs. Dedication also commented on her new role:

It has been really tense for me. I just feel like I am stretched so thin that I am not effective in teaching anything. This year I'm teaching two subjects. One of them is brand new to me. I'm not sure how to teach any of this. It makes me feel like a first year teacher. They have to see that.

In addition, Mrs. Nogray added:

After being thrown into a new subject with no support, I guess I kind of developed a chip on my shoulder. I resented that I wasn't teaching to the best of my ability when the person that I was working with had been doing it for years and could have really guided me. I felt like I was failing my students.

The physical environment of the new school was yet another middle school challenge encountered during the transition. The middle school was actually relocated to the former high school building which was over 60 years old. With the new surroundings came new problems.

Several participants indicated that they perceived the need for additional space or the condition of school buildings to be related to the school climate. Mrs. Motivated shared:

The physical environment of the new "old" school is not ideal to an effective middle school. Space is limited and the layout isn't functional. It is so spread out and is difficult for anybody to get from one place to another in a timely manner.

The classrooms are small and the technology is limited. The campus is open and accessible from all sides. It's just not conducive to a middle school.

Mrs. Feelgood also stated:

This [the physical condition of the school] is another area where I feel powerless. Our kids just seem to roam around at their own leisure. There is this huge disconnect between the sixth and seventh grade hall and the main building, and following up on their stories about where and why they have been gone so long is almost impossible.

And Mrs. Dedication added:

You can't really call it a "new" school. The sixth and seventh grade building is a relic. But the biggest problem is that it is just so spread out and open. There is just too much opportunity for the students to be where they shouldn't be.

Many of the comments made by the participants were mirrored during my field observations. During both the faculty meetings and teacher led meetings I attended, the majority of time seemed to be dominated by questions and comments on school procedures. Teachers pointed out that certain practices were not working or that there were no procedures in place for various situations that may arise. "If I hear someone say "I don't know" one more time, I am just going to lose my mind," said one teacher during a faculty meeting as she expressed her frustration that no one knew who she should go to with her questions about a Response to Intervention student. There were also frequent complaints about building issues such as leaky ceilings and electrical outlets that did not work.

### *The Middle School Advantage*

Many of the participants acknowledged that the transition to a true middle school was a step in the right direction. Participants who perceived a better climate after the transition tended to believe that separating the grades into two distinct schools was more conducive to an effective learning environment. The separation allowed administrators and teachers to incorporate more age appropriate programs and activities and relieved some of the congestion.

Mr. Popular explained why the transition was good:

The climate [before the move] was more difficult because the age range was so different between a fourth grader and an eighth grader. I was always uncomfortable mixing the different grades in the lunchroom or the media center. I still look at the little ones as babies, and as a teacher I see just how grown these middle school kids think they are. I was happy when we finally split into two schools. Teachers are trained to deal with certain age groups and usually do it better if they enjoy that particular age of a student.

Mrs. Girlfromhere also commented, "I do think the environment is better for the kids though. Breaking up the age groups just makes sense. Things like the dress code and the discipline policy can be more suited to the age levels," and Mrs. Leanonme stated, "I am thankful to have a classroom though. I have been teaching in the "trailer park" for the past 4 years." When asked to describe the conditions before the transition, Mrs.

Universal replied:

[The school was] Noisy. Crowded. Annoying. There were too many age groups and there was no progressive plan for discipline because the students were so

different in maturity. With the split the administrators had fewer teachers and students to deal with.

Clearly, the most recognized advantage of the transition to a middle school was the formation of an age appropriate environment. Most participants agreed that the two schools should be divided, even if they perceived that the way the move was handled had damaged the school climate.

### *Results for Research Question 2*

Research Question 2 was *how do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?* There were many responses elicited from this question, thus leading to a number of emergent codes. Some of these codes, such as cramped classrooms, having a spread out campus, and being located in an outdated building, addressed the physical working conditions of the new school. Other codes, such as communication and relationships, were pertinent to the social working conditions of the school. Stress, lack of acknowledgement, uncertainty about job status and role, and a lack of autonomy or inclusion in school decisions were all codes that were cited as being related to the psychological conditions of the work environment. Examining the codes together, I determined the theme for Research Question 2 to be “Stressful working conditions damage the overall school climate.”

Overall, physical safety was not a major source of apprehension for the participants. Most of the participants indicated that they felt physically secure in the new school. Mrs. Universal explained, “I feel very comfortable and safe teaching,” and Mrs. Motivated stated, “I feel relatively safe physically.” Participants 6 and 9 also shared feelings of safety.

Some participants, however, shared perceptions that the school climate was related to feeling physically comfortable and secure while in the school. Some expressed concerns about the physical layout of the new school, citing the openness of the school campus as a possible safety issue. Mr. Popular conveyed concerns:

There are a lot of areas that could use work. Physically the school is way too open. It's better than before [the move], because there is a clear separation of the different grade levels. But the school is not self-contained. It is open to potential problems. We have no way of keeping strangers out or our students in.

Mrs. Leanonme was also concerned about safety, "It is way, way too open. Anybody could walk on campus and we could do nothing about it. It is also in desperate need of repair."

Some participants were also stressed by the difficulties of the new school's layout. Mrs. Nogray explained, "It is small and cramped. Having two grade levels share two restrooms (shakes her head) ... not good." Mrs. Dedication also described the inconvenience of the physical environment:

My classroom is at the very edge of the outer most building. It is about as far as you can get from the main building. Every morning I have to go all the way to the main building to sign in. Even if I get to school five minutes early I end up being five minutes late because I have to make that trek.

Research shows that the aesthetic qualities of a school influence teacher recruitment, staff morale, and teacher attrition rates (Baker & Bernstein, 2012; Cheng et al., 2011; Sanoff & Walden, 2012; Uline, 2008). The age of the building and the limited space were the major problems identified by the participants relating to the physical

environment of the new school. These grievances were congruent with the literature on the relationship between school climate and the physical condition of the working environment.

The social conditions of the school allude to the interactions among its stakeholders, most notably the quality of the relationships established within the school community. Forming strong bonds is vital to developing a positive school climate, and has been shown to impact student achievement as heavily as the quality of instruction (Cohen & Geier, 2010; Perkins, 2007). Stable and supportive relationships foster professionalism for teachers and self-efficacy for all group members (Maier, 2010; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012).

A lack of peer support can be detrimental to a school's climate, and research has deemed poor teacher-teacher relationships to be a major contributor to teacher burnout (O'Malley et al., 2012). The responses of participants interviewed during this study reinforced the findings outlined in the literature review, as evidenced by Mrs. Universal:

[We need] comradery. Working with people you really like makes coming to work a good thing. Before the new school, we were comfortable with each other and had worked well together and became very good friends. Some of these relationships carried over while others didn't. My relationships with my new peers were more work related. It was just business. Pretty lonely sometimes. I missed having people that I could vent to.

Mrs. Nogray also expressed a sense of loss during the transition, "We are definitely not as close as before. We are all so busy that we just kind of pass each other in the halls."

Mrs. Leanonme further explained feelings of disconnectedness with other teachers after the transition:

I do have to admit that I was really shocked by the way the other teacher of my content area behaved toward me. I just was not used to someone being so closed off or refusing to share resources. I felt really isolated a lot of the time. This was disheartening to me. I guess being a teacher doesn't automatically make you a team player.

In the context of my study, psychological conditions refer to factors that could potentially affect the mental well-being of an individual, such as feelings of isolation or rejection from colleagues or superiors. Psychological elements have a strong bearing on a teacher's effectiveness and can significantly influence a teacher's decision whether or not to remain in the occupation (Steinberg et al., 2011). Uncertainty about job responsibilities, an excessive workload, inconsistency in administrative procedures, lack of acknowledgement, feelings of inadequacy in job performance, and a loss of autonomy were among the factors addressed by participants in relation to the psychological conditions that shaped the school climate. Exhaustion, stress, and strained relationships also seemed to dominate this theme. Participants specified a lack of communication with fellow teachers and administrators and feelings of isolation as impairments to the overall morale of the school.

Teacher uncertainty denotes the teachers' perceptions that changes in the school climate are associated with feelings of uncertainty and unease among teachers. Participants mainly attributed feelings of uncertainty to poor communication among teachers and administrators and to a reluctance by administrators to include teachers in



the decision making process. Being reassigned to new content areas or grade levels was one major source of uncertainty for teachers, as shared by Mrs. Universal:

You never know where or what position you may have the next year. Not knowing is the hardest part. It makes you paranoid. I don't understand why things have to be so secretive. I don't think they realize that they are playing with people's lives. This year has steadily gotten better, but I can only wonder what might be in store for next year. Our administration seems to like to play fruit basket turnover without letting us know until right at the very end.

Mrs. Motivated further indicated, "It [the transition] was crazy. We didn't really know where we would be or who we would be teaching with," and Mrs. Nogray explained:

Now we don't have teams anymore, and it is much harder to feel like we are working together. We don't know who's teaching who. This year has been one of the hardest for me. I realize that as a group we don't take change very well. We are being asked to do so many things, but nobody is showing us how to do them. I feel like I am wandering around aimlessly.

Mrs. Feelgood stated:

So many of the procedures that were second nature for us immediately became a major undertaking. Simple tasks like walking to and from lunch were overly complicated and never really smoothed themselves out. I felt confused and dumb so often not knowing how to answer simple questions

about where to go and when to be there. I was as lost as the kids most of the time.

Some participants also reported feeling a certain amount of insecurity about their job responsibilities and capabilities. One participant shared her experience with the new standards:

I have been teaching math for many years. I thought I was pretty good at it. This year I was assigned as a mentor for two first year teachers. Well, the two of them came to me one afternoon asking for help on one of the lessons. The standard they were teaching called for dividing fractions using models. Models? I was lost. I had to get out their textbooks and STUDY the lesson myself. After going over it about ten times I finally felt like I understood it. So I go about explaining one of the problems to them. I totally messed it up. [I] Had to start all over. We finally got the right answer together. I felt like I was the first year teacher. All I kept thinking was, “If I don’t understand this, how am I supposed to make a bunch of sixth graders get it?”

Mrs. Dedication also shared:

I don’t always feel safe professionally. I don’t like not knowing where I’ll be or what I’ll be doing next year. I take a lot of pride in what I do, and I like to prepare in order to do a good job. Right now none of us know what to prepare for. It makes me nervous.

Moreover, Mrs. Leanonme offered:

Stress from the state level has dampened our spirits in many ways. It seems to all be coming from the top, but we little people in the trenches are the ones who have to make things happen. But we are given no training and no clear guide of what's expected of us. It's just frustrating.

Teachers also expressed that an unrealistic and sometimes irrelevant workload was detrimental to staff morale and the school climate. Many felt overwhelmed when tasked with paperwork and other duties outside the classroom. Parent conferences, Professional Learning Community meetings, IEP meetings, and after school committee meetings were just some of the factors associated with eliminating much needed planning and instructional time, thus promoting psychological exhaustion among staff members (Fisher, 2011).

During one faculty meeting, a teacher lightheartedly remarked, "I'm doing so many things that I'm getting nothing done!" Mrs. Nogray stated, "It has been really tense for me [this year]. I just feel like I am stretched so thin that I am not effective in teaching anything." Mrs. Feelgood mirrored this viewpoint by saying, "We just have so much to do. People are stressed and tired," and Mrs. Dedication added:

[The move was] So stressful. There were just so many things coming at me at once. Moving to a different grade level meant teaching a different, unfamiliar set of standards. I had to get used to a new group of teachers. I had to get used to the new campus, and that was a big job. Add to that the

fact that we are under this whole Focus School thing and have a new teacher rating system. Most of us are running ragged.

Some of the participants also indicated that they felt new assignments were unnecessary and pointless and caused undo stress. Mrs. Leanonme described one scenario:

One of the stipulations of this whole thing [Focus School status] is that each of us have at least 150 log-ons to the state data system. The problem is that nobody told us why we needed to do it. So all of us figured out that every time you clicked on a student's name, it counted as a log-on. We would just make it a point to click on about ten kids a day, but we never really looked at what we were clicking on. We were racking up like 300 log-ons, but it was all just a put-on. Obviously the intent of this assignment was to make us use the past performance information on our students, and I can see that there is probably a lot of helpful material that I should be using. But telling me that I have to use it at least 150 times makes me more concerned about quantity over quality. I just want to get it over with.

Mrs. Dedication also remarked:

The kids will ask me "When will we ever use this?" Nowadays I ask myself the same thing. There just seems to be a lot of time wasted on things that really won't help these kids down the road. We should be preparing them for where they are headed. Not all kids are made for

college. We should be teaching these kids life skills like balancing a checkbook. I just feel sometimes that I am doing them a huge disservice.

Research has indicated that many teachers perceive strict curricular and instructional regulations, harder job requirements, and intensive teacher-evaluation procedures as damaging to their creativity and motivation (NSCC, 2013). Teachers need a certain amount of autonomy in the extent to which they can make decisions about what or how they teach. Some participants felt a loss of independence during the transition to the new school, as Mrs. Motivated revealed:

They did seem to be dead set on getting “control” over the teachers and student behavior, logistics, and academic goals. I felt very micromanaged about small things that I just had always handled my own way. Like when to take roll. Why do I need someone to tell me how to take roll? I just think those are silly battles to choose.

Mrs. Universal explained how teacher independence changed:

There have been so many changes. Sad to say, but my opinion has gone in a downhill direction. I remember the standards being so high when I was in school. Now it seems that the “higher-ups” make a bunch of ridiculous changes that actually push mediocrity. Unfortunately, my new outlook is that people who know how to teach actually teach. People who don’t know how just tell others how to teach.

Mrs. Leanonme shared similar views:

I have quickly realized that the teaching aspect is such a small portion of being a teacher. Most of our time is spent telling other people how we are going to teach.

I think that if teachers were given more time to invest solely in the students, they could make some real differences. We could make some real advances in learning.

Teacher acknowledgement refers to the teachers' perceptions that providing acknowledgement and respect is important for developing a positive school climate. Research has indicated teacher recognition as one of the most fundamental needs for job satisfaction (NSMC, 2013), as supported by Mr. Popular, "And respect [is important]. Teachers need to know that they are appreciated and valued for their hard work." Mrs. Nogray also explained why she felt that acknowledgement was important but lacking after the transition:

I just don't feel like I am being taken seriously when a problem arises. I'm not one who always has a problem. In fact, I rarely have an issue that needs any attention beyond my classroom. And if for no other reason, the fact that I don't make a lot of waves and that I do handle things should be enough to convince them that if I come to them the problem is real. Each time I have gone to them this year I have come away feeling insignificant.

Mrs. Leanonme also stated:

We need to feel like we have an active role in the decision making process, especially the decisions that affect us directly. I know that I feel a lot more obligated to do my best when I know that my input was considered.

Mr. Nononsense added, "[We need] Acknowledgement. If I tell you there is a problem, there is a problem. At least give me the courtesy of acting like what I say means something."

Mrs. Feelgood also felt that respect and acknowledgement were important:

[Teachers need] A little respect to begin with. Teachers who have been there for years and years deserve to have a say in where they will be and what they will be doing. Taking that away from them just strips them of their dignity.

Mrs. Dedication expressed the importance of acknowledgement:

A little recognition goes a long way, too. Teaching is an integrity driven profession. Most of us would rather have our hard work pointed out than have a cash bonus. Well, maybe not that far, but we do thrive off a little positive reinforcement.

These responses support the findings of the TALIS. Strong, innovative teaching deserves recognition, and this recognition does not have to be some materialistic reward. Open acknowledgment and positive reinforcement are more valued by teachers. In fact, public recognition of a teacher's contributions is considered to be the biggest factor determining teacher self-efficacy, which, in turn, leads to better student performance (OECD, 2012).

Research indicates that open communication is foundational in building trust within a school (Metlife, 2013). Mrs. Universal expressed the importance of communication by stating, "Communication [is important], too. We need to be able to talk to each other and we need to keep each other aware of what's going on." Mrs. Nogray shared that not being listened to, which is part of communication, was detrimental to the school climate:

Probably a bigger reason [we are unhappy] though is that we just feel like we aren't being listened to. We have a lot of good ideas about how to make this

school better. And who is better qualified to make changes? But every day we find out that we have some new practice to adopt or a new way to write our lesson plans. Not only are we powerless, we are also just kept in the dark. It makes for a very poor climate. Everyone just looks defeated.

Mrs. Leanonme stated communication about processes and procedures was important, “Communication is one [issue] for sure. So many problems could be avoided if the right hand knew what the left hand was doing.” Mrs. Girlfromhere also explained, “Also [we need] open communication. We need to be comfortable talking to the administrators and we need to know that they will be up front with us.”

The teachers’ need for meaningful communication coincides with research on establishing positive relationships and good staff morale. Successful communication practices create a school culture that is accepting and empathetic to all (MetLife, 2013). Participants associated the level of communication with the condition of other factors such as trust and motivation

### *Results for Research Question 3*

Research Question 3 was *what factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate?* Several replies were obtained, some of which have already been discussed in relation to Research Question 2. Teacher support, proper communication, consistency in procedures, respect, and open acknowledgement were all factors identified as directly influencing the school climate as perceived by the participants of the study. After reviewing the interviews and field notes, I ascertained that all of the codes somehow related to the level of trust within the school.



Consequently, for Research Question 3 I settled upon “Trusting relationships are essential for establishing a positive school climate” as my theme.

Studies indicate that trust does not solely ensure school success, but schools lacking trust have virtually no possibility of establishing a positive climate. Trusting environments heighten perceptions of self-efficacy and willingness to collaborate (NSMC, 2013). Building trust consists of equipping teachers with the tools needed to do their jobs most effectively, and, therefore, having confidence in administration is important for developing a positive school climate.

Mr. Popular described the significance of trust in administrators as follows, “A strong administration is one thing [teachers need]. They [administrators] need to be able to bring the staff together and create opportunities for the students and teachers to take pride in their school.” Mrs. Leanonme explained, “If I can’t trust administration to hear my concerns and to take them seriously, it makes me not want to go to them with issues and kind of forces me to handle things on my own.” Mrs. Dedication also explained her views:

I think the administration is most responsible [for the condition of school climate]. The administration has the power to establish practices that can boost or break morale. They can institute measures that either build a sense of community or that foster feelings of isolation. And they have the power to step in and handle staff problems that might negatively affect the overall climate.

Mrs. Girlfromhere further stated, “You have to put trust in administrators that they will make the best decisions for you as a school and as a teacher in the school.”

Some teachers indicated that feelings of mistrust ensued when they felt that they were not being adequately supported, as Mrs. Motivated stated, “[We need] Support for the teachers. We need back up with discipline and with all these new things we are required to do.” Mrs. Nogray described the role of support in the following manner, “At least give me the courtesy of acting like what I say means something. I’ll do my job, and I’ll do my best, but at least pretend that you understand where I’m coming from.” Mrs. Dedication explained, “My number one ingredient would have to be support. There is nothing worse than feeling like you have been kicked under the bus by the ones who are supposed to have your back,” and Mrs. Girlfromhere also commented, “And [we need] support. We need to know that administrators are in our corner.”

A lack of communication was also cited by participants as a stressor negatively affecting relationships with administrators. Price (2011) found that administrators who were honest and forthcoming tended to ease the process of change for their staff. Conversely, administrators who did not actively involve their teachers or did not routinely share information were perceived to be inconsiderate and unconcerned. Mrs. Leanonme shared her feelings about the level of communication she had with the administration:

It seemed as if everyone was on edge, especially the administrators. And especially with this whole new evaluation system we have. They were being pulled in all directions, and a lot of us felt like we weren’t being listened to because we rarely see them unless they are evaluating us. We kind of felt left out, like decisions about us were being made without us having any say in it.

Mrs. Girlfromhere added:

You never know where or what position you may have the next year. Not knowing is the hardest part. It makes you paranoid. I don't understand why things have to be so secretive. I don't think they realize that they are playing with people's lives.

Several actions taken by the administration during the transition were perceived by teachers to be indicative of a lack of respect for their positions and capabilities. Trust is built when administrators demonstrate a belief in the expertise of their faculty, encourage them to take risks, and make sound decisions for their students (Bankole, 2011). Mrs. Universal commented on the importance of respect, "Everybody needs to show respect for one another. Teachers to students and students to teachers. Teachers to administrators and administrators to teachers. The custodians deserve respect. The lunchroom staff deserve respect. Everybody."

Teachers' perceptions of disrespect were also correlated with feelings of insignificance within the school community and being treated as subordinates rather than colleagues. Tierney (2012) found that the nature of the relationship with the administrator is a key determinant of a teacher's decision to remain at a given school. When asked what she wanted in her relationship with the principal, Mrs. Leanonme replied:

Comfort. Things are so much better when people are at ease with each other. I'll learn a lot better if I'm not scared to death of you. And I'll teach a lot better if I don't feel threatened all the time.

Mr. Nononsense commented:

Things changed a lot when we came here [the new school]. [The principal] was no longer my friend; he suddenly became my supervisor. The relationship that used to be easy and fun turned into a bunch of mass e-mails telling us what had to be turned in when. It made me feel very small.

Mrs. Girlfromhere gave this example of how she felt devalued by administration, “I felt very micromanaged about small things that I just had always handled my own way. Like when to take roll. Why do I need someone to tell me how to take roll?”

Distrust also resulted from a lack of consistency in procedures, which refers to maintaining a fair and progressive discipline process. Mr. Popular stated, “Secondly, [teachers need] consistency. What goes for one goes for all,” and Mrs. Leanonme offered, “We need some consistency [with administration] meaning business and showing some consistency in their discipline practice.” Mrs. Feelgood explained: “Consistent procedures would help, too. Teachers and students should be aware and familiar with the consequences of their actions. There should be no surprises.”

Mrs. Leanonme shared:

I think it’s a 50/50 split between the teachers and the administration. Even if a teacher is jam-up in the classroom 95% of the time, if the one time things go wrong and she is not supported by the administrators, her credibility is gone. Likewise, if our administration can’t be sure that a teacher is handling her stuff properly, then they can’t be expected to back her without question. It’s a two way street.

Participants also stressed that teachers must be able to trust one another in order to establish a positive school climate. Mrs. Motivated stated “I believe trust is important to a school’s climate. Administrators need to feel they can trust their teachers to do their job.” Mrs. Feelgood added, “Teachers who trust each other surely get along better,” and Mr. Nonsense commented, “[We need] Trust. We need to know that we can count on each other. We need to believe that we always have the best interest of the kids in mind.”

Mrs. Girlfromhere explained what trust meant to her, “You put trust in your grade-level teachers that they will guide you to a great solution to a big problem and that they do not make the problem worse. Be part of the solution, not the problem.”

### Summary

Chapter 4 is an examination of the responses of interviews conducted with nine educators teaching at a newly established rural middle school. The interviews were designed to elicit responses to three primary research questions: (a) How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate? (b) How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate? and (c) What factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate? Each question resulted in the advent of emergent themes.

The two themes for Research Question 1 were the “middle school challenge” and the “middle school advantage.” Participants who perceived a better climate before the move cited the loss of teaching teams and peer relationships as causes for the decline. Participants perceiving a better climate after the transition viewed the new configuration

as a more appropriate environment for middle grades students. Some perceived the stress of the transition to be temporary and manageable.

The theme for Research Question 2 was “stressful working conditions damage school climate.” For the purpose of this study, physical conditions include limited class space, outdated facilities, and a spread out, open campus. Social considerations included strained and unfamiliar peer relationships. Factors associated with psychological conditions consisted of a lack of teacher acknowledgement, poor communication, a lack of respect, and uncertainty about job responsibilities.

“Trusting relationships are essential to building a positive school climate” was the major theme for Research Question 3. Poor communication, a lack of consistency in procedures, inadequate teacher support, and an absence of recognition undermined this theme. The importance of trust in administration was evident, being addressed in some manner in all nine interviews.

Chapter 5 will examine the findings of the research questions in light of the literature reviewed. Recommendations for practice and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 4 presented the results from this study. In Chapter 5, I have addressed the findings with respect to the research questions and reviewed literature. I have also discussed the conclusions of this study and its implications. Chapter 5 offers a short review of the study followed by recommendations based on an analysis of the data.

#### Summary of Research

The importance of school climate has come to the forefront of school improvement measures during the past 30 years. Current research emphasizes the role of positive school climates in raising student achievement and improving school dropout rates. Moreover, school climate has been shown to compensate for other factors such as socioeconomic status (NSCC, 2013). Once established, school climate is difficult to change, even if the leadership or teaching staff of the institution changes. A school's climate may quickly become a determinant of its public reputation and may interfere with processes such as teacher recruitment or community involvement (Brand, 2011).

Considering the magnitude of the issue, it is vital that schools take measures to build constructive, supportive environments that encourage the optimum development of both students and staff. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the factors affecting the perceptions of teachers of the school climate in a small rural school district undergoing significant transitions as its fourth through eighth grade school divided into two distinct schools, one fourth and fifth grade intermediate school

and one sixth through eighth grade middle school. The study focused on the newly established middle school.

I addressed the following research questions during my study:

1. How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?
3. What factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate?

Qualitative research emphasizes the various meanings people give to shared life experiences (Creswell, 2014). The researcher is central to the method as is the primary collector and interpreter of data throughout the study. A qualitative approach was suitable for the purpose of this study as each participant was asked to relay common experiences through personal unique perspective.

My theoretical framework was underscored by an interpretivist approach as each participant offered a distinctive outlook on a shared situation. The participants' perspectives were analyzed with regard to three major components of school climate: sense of safety, quality of relationships, and the physical environment. This study was significant because the school observed was undergoing a multitude of changes at once, thus creating a set of circumstances that may affect the overall climate. However, the results of this study are unique to this particular school and may not be completely representative of other schools undergoing similar research.



This case study took place in a small rural school during its first year as a sixth through eighth grade middle school. Participants were chosen through purposeful sampling and consisted of nine teachers with varying years of experience and backgrounds. The questions used for this study sought to uncover specific data regarding the teachers' perspectives on the concept of school climate and how it is influenced by various circumstances.

I collected data through individual interviews and field observations, taking notes during these processes and later transcribing the notes for easier review and reorganization. Data was examined to identify themes relating to teachers' perceptions of the overall climate of the school. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcribed results to verify the accuracy of the information and to allow participants the option to make any needed changes or clarifications.

Although most of the participants acknowledged that the transition to an independent middle school was challenging, there was incongruity in responses regarding how the move affected the school climate. Participants also expressed their opinions on the factors influencing the condition of the school climate. Low morale and professional uncertainty were identified as the most relevant contributors to a negative school climate, while trust and acknowledgement were major causes for a positive school climate. The following section reviews the responses in more detail and relates the findings to the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

### *Research Question 1*

*How does the transition to a middle school configuration combined with additional organizational changes impact the perceptions of teachers of the school climate?*

Huss and Eastep (2011) indicated that adolescence is a developmentally critical time for students and that custom programs should be created to target the unique needs of this group. Over the course of the interviews, it became clear that most of the participants viewed the transition to a middle school configuration as a good move. Several of the participants pointed out that the move allowed for a more age appropriate environment for all students and that the move enabled policies like the dress code to be more tailored to the age levels. Mrs. Girlfromhere exemplified this opinion by stating, “Breaking away from the elementary school environment and moving into a more mature middle school environment definitely changed the feel of the school. It’s more mature.” The transition alleviated some of the congestion associated with having five grade levels in one location, and there no longer was the fear of the older kids “picking on” the younger ones.

Participants’ responses favoring the separation of the intermediate school and middle school are consistent with current research on adolescent growth. Adolescence has been identified as one of the most developmental stages of life (Huss & Estep, 2011). Children experience a host of changes physically, socially, and psychologically during this pivotal stage of life, and they undergo these changes at different rates and with varying intensity. Adolescent students need an educational setting tailored to their unique needs (NMSA, 2003).

A middle school's purpose is to allow a smooth transition between the micromanagement of elementary school and the independence demanded in high school (ACT, 2008). This includes a distinct curriculum, a suitable schedule, and proper accommodations (Huss & Estep, 2011). Counselors and administrators should establish supports and programs directly related to adolescent needs. The separation also facilitates the establishment of age appropriate extracurricular activities and sports programs (NMSA, 2003).

Several of the interviewees recognize the benefits of the conversion to a "true" middle school, pointing out that they are able to be more consistent in how they handle matters such as lunch duty and break supervision. Mrs. Nogray stated, "[The climate] is better than before, because there is a clear separation of the different grade levels," going on to point out that extracurricular activities could be tailored to suit the age groups with middle school students conducting more involved community service projects and attending more out of town athletic and academic events. Mrs. Dedication also supported this position:

I believe that students do need to be divided as far as age due to the different stages of childhood and adolescence. Having your own school makes the climate better in my opinion. The kids are able to do age appropriate activities that the little ones couldn't do like dances and pep rallies. It just makes for a stronger school spirit. They have more in common.

The transition also changed the role of the administration at the middle school. Mrs. Universal commented, "With the split the administrators had fewer teachers and students to deal with." Administrators were no longer pressured to adjust their discipline

measures according to age and, therefore, could establish one uniform policy for the entire school. One administrator expressed his feelings during an after school faculty meeting by stating, “It’s [the move] a welcome change from having to go from ‘nice principal to mean principal’ all the time.”

A physical separation, however, is only a small part of creating a legitimate middle school. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2003) cites the incongruity between the organization of schools and the needs of adolescents as the top reason for low student achievement. The NMSA offers several essential elements to address the multitude of developmental changes middle school students undergo, one of the most touted practices being the use of team teaching (NMSA, 2003).

The participants who found the climate to be better before the move offered the lack of teaching teams as one of the main reasons. Interviewees pointed out that having teams made their jobs much easier by having common planning times and sharing the same students, characteristics which have been recognized as beneficial to student learning and to teacher effectiveness (NMSA, 2003).

Participants expressed that they preferred having teams because it made them feel closer to both their peers and their students. Teaching teams allow teachers to get to know the kids through the eyes of fellow teachers, often offering more objective view of a given situation. Teachers are also able to see a different side of their peers by listening to the kids and by collaborating with them on a regular basis. When asked about how she felt about losing teaching teams, Mrs. Dedication answered, “It felt a lot closer. I know that I felt more bonded to the school and the people I worked with. I saw myself as a player in the successes and failures of the school.” The stress level is often diminished

for both teachers and students, thus encouraging a better learning environment for all involved.

The elimination of teaching teams seemed to correspond with a lack of connectedness for some of the participants. Emphasizing the loss of being identified with a specific working group, Mrs. Motivated stated:

First, I would love to have teaching teams back. It is so much better. Who you are paired up with to teach can make or break your year. Administrators should really look at the personalities and teaching habits of their staff before making big changes like this.

Several of the teachers indicated feelings of isolation and rejection after the transition due to the fact that, for many of them, the move did not only involve a change of building, but also a change of grade level or content area. Many of the teachers had never worked together before, and, therefore, lacked the feelings of belonging they may have had prior to the move. Mrs. Nogray described the change by saying, “There was a light heartedness that seems to be lacking now,” and Mrs. Girlfromhere added, “I felt really isolated a lot of the time. This was disheartening to me. I guess being a teacher doesn’t automatically make you a team player.”

Team teaching encourages relationship building and professional support. Teachers who utilize interdisciplinary teams report more faculty cohesiveness and positive perceptions of their team members. Teams are automatically forced to work collaboratively in order to design and implement constructive instructional plans that target their particular learners, and the more a team collaborates, the more team members become secure in their own teaching practices (Haverback & Mee, 2013).

Teachers on teams report higher perceptions of school climate than their counterparts, but Wilbur Middle School has not adopted team teaching (NMSA, 2003). One reason is the numbers. Due to the ever increasing population, the enrollment at Wilbur Middle School has grown to the point that each grade level required an additional teacher. Sixth grade, which formerly had eight teachers, now has nine. Whereas prior to the move the grade levels could be split into two four man teams, the extra teacher makes the team approach very difficult.

Another reason administration has not incorporated team teaching is to minimize the possibility of preferential placement. In a school system as small as Little County, word of mouth carries a lot of weight. Typically, under the team teaching system, one team becomes dubbed as the *good* team and one as the *bad* team. Each year many parents have lobbied to have their children placed on the good team. To honor these requests translates into a team with highly active, involved parents and one with very little parental support. Parental involvement has been linked to higher student achievement, improved attendance, and better behavior (Haldeman, 2010). Therefore, one team ends up with a disproportionate number of problems, including more discipline referrals and lower test scores. A situation such as this also has the potential to create animosity and distrust among the teachers.

Participants looking unfavorably on the school climate also indicated increased feelings of insecurity after the move. A lack of communication between teachers and administrators resulted in a general state of confusion, and some teachers felt as though the transition was chaotic and lacked forethought, as Mrs. Motivated expressed, “Simple tasks like walking to and from lunch were overly complicated and never really smoothed

themselves out.” Procedures that had been firmly established were now unclear or undetermined, and teachers were often left with little or no guidance as to how to handle the issues arising.

Part of the turmoil was derived from outside influences being mandated by state policies. For instance, many of the teachers felt they were rushed to adopt the new Common Core Standards before being properly trained. A 2013 survey conducted by *Education Week* found that 72% of the teachers who participated had received 4 or fewer days of professional development, and only 22% had fully incorporated the standards into their teaching practice (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2013). *Education Week* conducted a similar survey one year later, finding that even though the amount of professional training had increased, 53% of the respondents felt that the training was insufficient, and eight out of ten surveyed indicated that they wanted more instruction (Education Week Research Center, 2014). Teachers were especially uncomfortable teaching the standards to certain subgroups, including special education and low income students.

I witnessed frustration by the teachers at Wilbur Middle School due to unclear expectations and inadequate training while conducting my research. During a faculty meeting where standards based instruction was being discussed, one teacher stated that she felt as if she “was given a game board with absolutely no instructions on how to play.” The teachers were being told that the new standards would require them to teach in new and different ways and that they were supposed to dig deeper into the concepts they present. However, the standards are vague and, therefore, open to interpretation. The general grievance seemed to be that teachers have repeatedly been trained on *what* to

teach, but very little attention has been given to *how* to teach the standards. During a grade level meeting a teacher shared her aggravation:

I am just frustrated. Some of my standards are so ambiguous that I have no idea what to do. I feel like everything that I have done before is wrong now, but I have no one to ask how to do it the right way.

Accessing the proper resources to teach the standards was problematic and added to the feelings of uncertainty. Similar to Polikoff's (2014) findings, the school has adopted a math series allegedly aligned to the Common Core, but the content seemed to differ. The questions in the textbooks seem to be watered down and do not require the "rigor" for which the standards call. Online resources are plentiful, but often provide little consistency. One teacher described the problem, "It is overwhelming. I may find five different websites on the same topic, and every one of them is different. So, which one is right? What's most important? I can't teach it all. It's crazy."

Another external source of uncertainty was the standardized test tied to the Common Core. Although the test will not officially be administered until the next school year, administration was adamant that teachers prepare for it. However, there was a definite lack of information offered as to what would be included on the test or how the test would be formatted. Due to high costs and extensive technology requirements, the state had chosen to drop the PARCC assessment and develop its own test (PARCC, 2013). Therefore, the new test was a work in progress, and teachers were unaware of how the test would be formatted. Many of the teachers were troubled by the idea of preparing for a test that had not yet been written. During one content area meeting, I witnessed a group of math teachers discussing the fact that students were being asked to



use calculators on certain sections of the standardized test. One of the attendees commented:

And they tell us that we get to use calculators on part of the test. That's great.

But what part? I've asked, but nobody knows. Not even our regional math representative. It's like they just make it up as they go along.

The confusion over testing also contributes to the school wide angst about the new teacher evaluation system. Wilbur Middle School is in the first stages of adopting the new program, but very little information has been offered to the teachers. The whole process seems to be shrouded in mystery, and many of the teachers were uneasy about the bits and pieces they had heard. Mr. Nononsense commented that most of what he knew about the evaluation program he had "googled."

Participant sentiments suggest that much of the nervousness stemmed from a lack of understanding of what the new process would entail. There are three major components of the evaluation: observations, student growth, and student surveys (GaDOE, 2014; NYCDOE, 2013). The student growth component appears to be the most troubling of the three. Many teachers were distressed by the idea that their professional abilities would be judged according to how well their students perform on one test, a test that was still being developed and that was designed to test students in a format unfamiliar to them. One teacher conveyed her concern during a faculty meeting by stating "I don't even know anything about this test, so how is it that I am supposed to prepare these kids to take it? And how can you tell me that my job depends on this test?" During the same meeting another teacher expressed similar worry: "I have one student

who has already missed 21 days. I seriously doubt that we will see much ‘growth’ out of him. Why should we be blamed for that?”

The Partnership for Excellence in Education (2012) named low birth weight, poverty level, attendance, and fourth grade reading level to be four of the top ten indicators of academic attainment and workforce readiness; the effectiveness of individual teachers was not listed as a predominant influence. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants in this study were disgruntled by the idea of tying their professional abilities to standardized test scores. Moreover, students in rural communities face a number of socio-economic conditions that hinder their academic and behavioral readiness for school (Holmes, Sheridan, Witte, Bhatia, & Coutts, 2015).

Worries about the new evaluation measures were typical conversation pieces at Wilbur Middle School, but also across the state and nation. Teachers were not the only group alarmed at the prospect of using value-added assessments to evaluate instructional effectiveness; administrators and university professors also began speaking out against the practice. Educational advocates from many states such as New York, Illinois, and Georgia have written open letters to state officials protesting against unfair accountability measures (Strauss, 2012). Activists argue that it is potentially problematic to rely on a test based on brand new standards and that teachers should not be expected to have mastered teaching material that keeps being revised and reorganized (Chingos, 2012).

Money from RT3 has been geared toward developing teacher accountability measures rather than securing the much needed professional development opportunities to equip teachers with the skills needed to properly communicate the new standards (Weiss, 2013). Opponents have also pointed out that a standardized test score cannot be

considered in isolation. Student achievement is a product of many dynamics including the pace at which different students learn. Achievement is also dramatically affected by the student's readiness to learn new content (David, 2010).

Teachers also aired concerns about the student survey component of the new system. Participants were not thrilled by the idea of being rated by a group of middle school children. The survey is supposed to serve as a method of documenting students' perceptions of their experiences in the classroom and to gain insight on the professional practices of their teachers. Student surveys that are well designed and properly conducted can offer an inexpensive and reliable determinant of teaching effectiveness (GaDOE, 2012; NYCDOE, 2013; TEA, 2011).

However, the use of such surveys has raised concerns for many teachers at Wilbur Middle School, most of them stemming from a lack of reliable information. Teachers have been told that the surveys contain unfamiliar language and confusing questions and that many of the students lack the maturity needed to accurately respond. Once again, several faculty members admitted that most of what they heard had been conveyed through outside sources. Some were also worried that the surveys would act merely as popularity contests or a means of retribution. Mrs. Motivated commented that "Middle school kids are not exactly unbiased. They are not exactly stable either. They love you one day and hate you the next."

I think it is important to note that most of the teachers agreed with the concept of teacher evaluation. In fact, the majority of interviewees felt that the former evaluation program was ineffective and not stringent enough. Mrs. Dedication said, "I work hard each and every day. I want to be told how I am doing. More importantly, I want the ones

who aren't doing their job to be told they aren't doing their jobs." However, the teachers also felt that the measure should be fair and that expectations should be made clear.

Yet another complication faced by Wilbur Middle School is its designation as a Focus School. The sizeable achievement gap between the special education subgroup and the highest scoring subgroup warranted this status. With the title came a host of requirements, some of which were similar to those set out by Race to the Top (GPEE, 2012). The school was required to develop a comprehensive improvement plan outlining strategies to improve student achievement and the means by which success will be measured. The plan calls for reviewing and restructuring curricular units in all subject areas and creating more detailed lesson plans incorporating specific differentiation approaches. The intervention also requires the use of diagnostic assessments and longitudinal data to guide instruction, especially for special education students.

Teachers complained that some of the initiatives they were being forced to undertake were wasteful and unnecessary. Many teachers were assigned to several committees targeting various issues including parent involvement, student attendance, and curriculum development. However, few of the teachers were well versed on the purposes or responsibilities entailed by being on such committees. Some reported that these types of initiatives seemed to just be hoops to jump through to make the school look good on paper. Teachers seemed to resent having their time stretched even farther than it already was. Mrs. Girlfromhere shared one scenario:

One of the stipulations of this whole thing is that each of us have at least 150 log-ons to the state data system. The problem is that nobody told us why we needed to do it. So all of us figured out that every time you clicked on a student's name it

counted as a log-on. We would just make it a point to click on about ten kids a day, but we never really looked at what we were clicking on. We were racking up like 300 log-ons, but it was all just a put-on. Obviously the intent of this assignment was to make us use the past performance information on our students, and I can see that there is probably a lot of helpful material that I should be using. But telling me that I have to use it at least 150 times makes me more concerned about quantity over quality. I just want to get it over with.

Brewster and Railsback (2003) indicated that administrative decisions perceived as arbitrary or not beneficial to the school significantly impact the morale and level of trust for the teachers. Educators often find it disheartening and offensive that their time and skills are devalued by being allocated to pointless tasks.

### *Research Question 2*

*How do teachers perceive the significance of physical, social, and psychological working conditions on school climate?*

The National School Climate Center identified safety, relationships, teaching circumstances, and physical conditions as the key components of a school's climate, and during interviews, the participants of my study offered responses supporting these findings (Gangi, 2009). Monetary considerations were rarely mentioned during the research. Most members of the school community indicated that psychological circumstances were most instrumental in determining the quality of the working environment. The participants of the study perceived a distinct drop in teacher morale resulting in strained relationships with coworkers and a lack of confidence or motivation in their teaching capacities. These feelings were often products of the social interactions

between teachers and principals and affected the school's willingness for reorganization and the drive to maintain it (Brewer & Railsback, 2003). Lack of sufficient space tended to be the main physical concern for the teachers interviewed.

Establishing good peer relationships was a recurring topic during the interviews. Teaching is an emotionally draining occupation that is often misunderstood and underappreciated by those who are not in the field. Educators need the opportunity to collaborate and commiserate with people who face the same challenges day to day. Knowing that others have experienced the same difficulties and being reassured that how they are feeling is *normal* gives teachers, especially new teachers, a sense of safety and self-efficacy (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2012). Relationships with colleagues can make or break the contentment of teachers, and teachers who work in inhospitable conditions often become disillusioned with their jobs altogether. Teacher collegiality is the strongest indicator of whether or not a teacher decides to remain in the teaching occupation, especially in small rural schools (Doll, 2010; Shindler et al., 2009).

The peer relationships in this study were disrupted in a couple of ways. Teachers were forced to move to different grade levels and, therefore, had to re-acclimate themselves to a new group of co-workers at the same time that they were trying to adjust to the emotional and academic qualities of a new group of students. Mrs. Leanonme described the new arrangement as “very formal” with everyone trying to “feel one another out.” The changing dynamics meant some veteran teachers had to come to a meeting of the minds when deciding on routines and procedures, and some new teachers found themselves in a trial by fire situation with little guidance.

Teachers were also forced to change content areas, thus being teamed with a new partner. This usually resulted with one teacher who had been teaching the subject for years and one who had never taught it before, even if that teacher was also a seasoned veteran. This sometimes led to compatibility problems between school members who were already set in their ways. Feelings of resentment and insecurity limited the open collaboration among some of the teachers unwilling to compromise and cooperate with their new colleagues. Seasoned veteran teachers became very territorial and felt threatened by being compared to other, younger teachers. Feelings of powerlessness and impressions of being disregarded soured the outlooks and compromised the camaraderie of many of the teachers.

Luckily, there are also those who habitually seek out the good in the events and people around them. In the midst of the chaos, many teachers serve as symbols of sanity, sometimes by offering a sympathetic shoulder to cry on and sometimes by cracking a much needed joke at just the right time. These personalities often provide the glue that transforms a group of working adults into a tight knit circle of friends (Gangi, 2009). Such teachers often inadvertently, yet very effectively, take on a leadership role in the eyes of their peers. During one faculty meeting, a teacher was commenting on her stressful day, but ended her groaning with a smile on her face, stating “but Mrs. Leanonme always knows the exact right time to bring in the cupcakes.”

Indeed, Mrs. Leanonme does stand out as an exemplar of uprightness and compassion. People around her unknowingly raise themselves to the bar being set for them. Educators who inspire others, both students and coworkers, to live up to their potential are invaluable to the cultivation of a positive school climate (New Teacher

Project, 2013). The influence that they possess does not necessarily come with a formal title of authority, yet they may yield a much stronger impact than school administrators. The power of teacher leaders stems from the respect of their peers and from their ability to make changes without demanding compliance. Teacher leaders have a gift for building teamwork and comradery.

The relationship between a teacher and an administrator can also have a significant influence on school climate. As the primary leader in the school, the principal's relationship to each individual teacher is consequential to the overall spirit of the setting. Scallion (2010) suggested that relational skills are essential for effective leadership and that relationship building should be a major goal for all administrators. Young's research found that the most influential aspect of the working environment was the teacher's perception of how well the principal worked with the staff (Tierney, 2012). Principals who encourage teachers to ask questions and take risks and who offer teachers the opportunity to share in decision-making evoke a sense of loyalty and pride for their staff members and students (Price, 2011). Good administrators work steadily to build and strengthen relationships amongst people who are just as diverse as the children they teach, and effective administrators show the kind of enthusiasm toward the staff that they expect teachers to show toward the students.

The relationships between the administration and the teachers of the target school were often fragile and disconnected. The physical layout of the school posed as a major source of separation with the sixth and seventh grade levels being located all the way across the campus from the front office. Administrators were often caught up in discipline matters or parent conferences, and it was not at all uncommon for teachers to



go for days without ever seeing the principal. This naturally led to a rift in communication, and some teachers felt that they were out of sight and out of mind. Mrs. Universal stated jokingly, "I sure do hope we don't have a fight down our way. It will be a full blown riot by the time we get any back-up."

Being present is necessary for effective leadership. Accessibility has been recognized as the most significant indicator of a leader's effectiveness (Protheroe, 2006). A visible principal has the opportunity to model the behaviors and practices he or she advocates, and an administrator cannot meet the needs of the staff unless the staff is able to communicate those needs. A lack of contact often triggers feelings of uneasiness and apprehension because people feel they are being "left out" of the loop and that things are happening to them over which they have no control. A principal who stays inaccessible to the school community has difficulty fostering an atmosphere of solidarity. The sense of family succumbs to feelings of isolation and frustration and staff members interpret the separation as a lack of support.

Participants in the study intimated that lack of communication and unstable working assignments prompted uncertainty among the staff members. Policies and procedures were not clearly laid out which naturally led to inconsistent practices and general disorganization. Teachers were hesitant to make decisions for fear that they were doing the wrong thing, as Mrs. Feelgood indicated when she stated, "We are being asked to do so many things, but nobody is showing us how to do them."

Being shifted around to different grade levels and different content areas also cultivated insecurity and suspicion for some teachers. Displaced teachers were not given an option and some were not informed of the move until the beginning of the school year.

DeMatthews (2014) specified that a school leader must demonstrate a transparent style of decision making if they wish to be perceived as fair and equitable by their staff. Teachers who are made aware of how decisions are determined and who are given a voice in the process are more likely to accept the hand they are dealt. These teachers are also more tolerant of those decisions that have to be made by the principal alone.

Participants indicated that the issues they were facing each day were significantly lowering teacher morale at Wilbur Middle School. Teacher morale plays a pivotal role in establishing school climate, and morale is influenced by many factors. Poor working relationships paired with external pressures can take a toll, and factors such as stress and low student motivation compromise the mental condition and self-worth of staff members (Gangi, 2009; Maier, 2010). In fact, it has been estimated that nationally over 300 billion dollars per year is lost because of conditions that are related to job satisfaction including absenteeism and lost productivity (Gallup Foundation, 2012). Conversely, professionals who are continually supported and openly appreciated for their efforts reflect high levels of performance and pride in their work (NSCC, 2013).

The teachers interviewed expressed feelings of low morale mainly to the overwhelming number of changes and added responsibilities confronting them all at once. Research indicates that teacher morale declines when their circumstances are changed abruptly or continuously (MetLife, 2014). Teachers, during both interviews and observations, repeatedly complained of being overloaded and unable to meet the rigorous demands being placed upon them. At one time, teachers were being asked to complete several surveys, watch a series of webinars, make contact with each parent of their

homeroom students, attend IEP and RTI meetings, serve on at least one committee, turn in updated curricular units, and create more detailed and differentiated lesson plans

Morale has also been damaged by the teachers' perceptions of their own abilities. Rural schools suffer from a host of problems including decreased funding, high teacher turnover, inadequate professional development opportunities, and low student achievement (AYPF, 2010; Harmon et al., 2007; Huysman, 2008). Teachers often feel that their students start the school year already behind where they should be developmentally, and they lack the manpower and specialized resources needed to help them succeed. Teachers may begin to doubt their ability to make a difference and become hesitant to go above and beyond what is required of them.

Wilbur Middle School is no exception to rural school circumstances. This year, however, the difficulty has been exacerbated by additional stressors such as the adoption of Common Core Standards and the relocation of teachers to different grade levels and content areas. Teachers demonstrated high levels of self-doubt and questioned the significance of their position. Many teachers were disheartened as they began the mission to incorporate the rigorous tasks demanded by the Common Core, commenting that they felt ill equipped to move their students from concrete memorization skills to higher-order, rigorous thinking skills.

### *Research Question 3*

*What factors are perceived to be most important to developing a positive school climate?*

School climate is the culmination of a variety of interrelated influences that affect the academic and psychological welfare of all members of the school community (NSCC, 2013). School climate is often a defining element for independent schools and can play a huge role in establishing a school's public image (Cohen & Geier, 2010). The climate underlies the condition of numerous parts of the school community, including student learning and teacher job satisfaction. Therefore, establishing a positive school climate should be at the forefront of any school's improvement plan.

When asked what factors most heavily attribute to the climate of a school, participants in this study pinpointed several considerations. The most identified dynamic was trust; trust in leaders and trust in peers. Trust is a fundamental prerequisite to the creation of a pleasant school environment, and its presence can help to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety that accompany organizational changes (Bankole, 2011). Trust grows over time and is authenticated through the day-to-day exchanges among the various stakeholders in the school community. Trust emboldens teachers to take risks and communicate their ideas to one another.

Trust in the principal was a dominant issue to the participants of this study for a variety of reasons. Mrs. Girlfromhere commented, "You have to put trust in administrators that they will make the best decisions for you as a school and as a teacher in the school." A number of teachers implied feelings of betrayal by the principal's decisions to move them away from the people they were comfortable working with to different grade levels or content areas or, for some, both. Teachers who had been at the school for many years were indignant that they were not consulted with before they were displaced.

One teacher explained that her transfer was especially upsetting because she had always felt a close connection with the principal. “I just thought I was a little more significant than that. He took an attitude like it was just business.” Indeed, research has indicated that establishing personal relationships between teachers and administrators is vital to the formation of trusting relationships. Trust is developed when the staff views the principal as a person first and then as a figure head (NSCC, 2013), but trust is broken when members feel they are being devalued or degraded. The forced and sometimes last minute relocations were perceived by some teachers to be indicators of indifference and disrespect. Participant Seven stated, “Teachers who have been there for years and years deserve to have a say in where they will be and what they will be doing. Taking that away from them just strips them of their dignity.”

The trust in administration was further compromised by a breakdown in communication. An administrator should be able to exchange ideas cooperatively and offer support unobtrusively, and school leaders should be open to different points and sensitive to various circumstances. Many policies and procedures were not clearly established before the transition, and teachers felt unprepared to handle situations and unsure how to answer questions. Partially due to the spread out campus and partially due to the multitude of unforeseen issues arising, the administration seemed to be out of touch with the faculty. Mrs. Dedicated shared her story:

One of the stipulations of this whole thing is that each of us have at least 150 log-ons to the state data system. The problem is that nobody told us why we needed to do it. So all of us figured out that every time you clicked on a student’s name it counted as a log-on. We would just make it a point to click on about ten kids a

day, but we never really looked at what we were clicking on. We were racking up like 300 log-ons, but it was all just a put-on.

Poor communication sometimes rears suspicion, and administrators who do not make a deliberate effort to connect with the teachers give the impression that they are hiding something or have no interest in what their colleagues have to contribute. In this study isolation often led to insecurity and uneasiness among teachers. Trust is more likely to be present when teachers have frequent contact with the principal (Protheroe, 2006).

Trust among teachers was also recognized as a determining factor of school climate (MetLife, 2013). The quality of peer relationships affects the mental welfare of both the teachers and the students, and having good social and professional ties plays a huge role in teachers' decisions to remain at a certain school, especially a rural school (Harmon et al., 2007; Smith, 2009). Teaching is a profession writ with weariness and exasperation. Having a circle of support is therapeutic and helps alleviate some of the discouragement at the end of the day. New teachers are especially vulnerable to feelings of frustration and inadequacy, and research indicates that the presence or absence of a trusted mentor figure strongly influences the attrition rate in rural school systems (Huysman, 2008). Teachers who feel connected with their co-workers show a heightened sense of self-efficacy and tend to exude a higher level of professionalism (Harmon et al., 2007).

Trust is created when teachers are convinced that the people they work with reflect positive moral values and have clear motivations (Bankole, 2011), and establishing trust takes time. The numerous position changes at Wilbur Middle School provoked a change in the relationships among the teachers and, therefore, a disturbance

in trust. The majority of staff members did not view their co-workers negatively; they were just unfamiliar with their new peers and uncertain of how to interact with them. Of course, the multiple staff swaps generated uneasiness and reluctance from some teachers to openly collaborate or readily discuss ideas for fear of how they might be accepted.

Working relationships change frequently, so having new staff members was not an experience with which Wilbur Middle School was unaccustomed. However, the circumstances were underscored by the fact that many of the staff changes were made against the teachers' wishes. Some of the teachers reported feelings of powerlessness and irrelevance to administrators.

The National School Climate Council stresses the importance of allowing educators to have input into decisions that directly affect the school's outcomes (NSCC, 2013). Shared decision-making is beneficial to all stakeholders, and bitterness over unwanted changes naturally affects the comradery among new groups of teachers. Some teachers, angered by the upset, closed themselves off to their peers, and the disconnect could be seen in staff meetings. New teachers were often noticeably isolated from their fellow content area teachers. There was not a sense of togetherness among the grade levels as there had been in years prior to the move.

Teachers also became distrustful of one another as they tried to understand the purpose of their relocation or why they had been paired with certain teachers. Studies have shown that transparency by leadership in making choices is fundamental to teacher job satisfaction and bears heavily on their psychological well-being (Price, 2011). Truthfulness is vital to the fitness of a school program, especially in times of intensified anxiety for the staff.

The reluctance of administration to explain their assignments sparked an air of paranoia because some of the teachers saw it as an indication that they were not doing their job properly. For some teachers it developed into a competition of sorts, with teachers who should have been collaborating actually declining the opportunity to work together. Situations like this obviously amplified the already tense atmosphere and distinctively impacted the overall school climate.

Another major indicator identified to determine school climate by participants was teacher support that, in essence, equates to the level of trust and acknowledgement administration places in their teaching staff. Wong (2004) found that teachers were more likely to remain within a district if they felt supported by their principal and accepted by their colleagues. The NSCC (2013) recognized professional support to be a safety factor for teachers and a strong consideration in a teacher's decision to remain in the field. Teachers who feel they are valued and listened to display a stronger sense of loyalty and a better work ethic.

One facet of teacher support relates to the amount of back up a teacher receives in school situations such as discipline issues or parent conferences. Staff members need to know that they are recognized as professionals and, therefore, taken at their word when reporting behavioral incidents or explaining grading procedures. Too often, however, teachers are asked to justify or rethink their actions. When administrators openly question teachers or override the decisions they have made, teachers feel undermined and teacher morale suffers.

Educators at Wilbur Middle School reported experiences where they felt they had been disempowered by the administration. Disappointment over administrative decisions



was often discussed during observations. Teachers complained about inconsistent and unequal punishments administered to students with the same infractions and the lack of progressive discipline measures issued to students who repeatedly misbehaved. One teacher told the group about a student who had been assigned to In School Suspension the week before for disrespect, but had been referred to the office for the same offense that day and was only given lunch room duty. “Why have a handbook?” one teacher asked.

Another part of teacher support relies on the administration’s willingness and efforts to supply teachers with the tools they need to feel successful in their classrooms. These tools, of course, include access to instructional materials and adequate technology. However, one of the most identified needs for educators is sufficient planning and collaboration time (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Effective teachers remain in hard to staff schools when collegial relationships are established through organized professional learning communities and structured planning time for content teachers (Wong, 2004).

Formal planning time was not necessarily safeguarded during this study. Teachers found themselves occupied with so many other things that they often sacrificed or minimized their time for collaboration. Some teachers gave up meeting altogether, instead opting to exchange lessons and ideas through e-mails. However, this approach further isolates team members and discourages consistency in instruction.

Teacher support also corresponds with teacher acknowledgement. According to a 2013 survey conducted by the New Teacher Project (NTP), a failure to distinguish outstanding teaching and enforce high teacher expectations weakens a school’s professional morale and increases the likelihood that effective teachers will relocate to other schools. Teachers who are recognized by their principals and peers feel a stronger

connection to the school and develop stronger attachments to their students (NTP, 2013). Acknowledgement becomes even more significant in low-income rural schools where typically there is a low value placed on the teaching occupation by the general community.

Five of the nine participants specifically addressed the need for acknowledgement during their interviews. Mrs. Leanonme shared her perceived importance of teacher recognition:

A little praise goes a long way, too. Teaching is an integrity driven profession. Teachers are not the glory grabber type, but most of us would rather have our hard work pointed out than have a cash bonus. Well, maybe not that far, but we do thrive off a little positive reinforcement.

#### Recommendations

At the beginning of my study, I believed that such research could help policymakers recognize the possible complications of transitioning from a blended elementary and middle grades design to a separate, true middle school configuration. I expected to examine the perceptions that teachers had of a *new* school that was actually established in a building that was over 50 years old. I also anticipated an emphasis on the experiences of the teachers trying to adjust to new state testing practices and evaluation systems along with the move.

However, as I began the research process, it quickly became apparent that this study was going to be most representative of the thoughts and feelings of the teachers with regard to a different type of dynamic than I expected. Although external factors such as new state policies were acknowledged and discussed to a certain degree, the

main areas of consideration turned out to be directly related to circumstances at the school level. The character and quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and administrators seemed to overshadow all other factors impacting school climate.

School specific rather than external factors were the most influential determinants of teachers' attitudes about their work. Recognizing that the health of a school is heavily shaped by the health of the school members, it is only practical that measures be taken to bolster and protect the social, emotional, and physical wellness of all representatives. This study was designed to examine the thoughts and feelings of various teachers as they adjusted to a brand new set of teaching circumstances, including moving to a new building, being placed in different grade levels, changing content areas, and being required to teach more than one subject.

A decline in school climate directly related to weakened relationships among teachers and administrators was indicated. Several recommendations for improving the condition of these relationships can be made based on the data from this study: (a) listen to the experts, (b) be seen, not just heard, (c) stroke some egos, (d) be still for a minute, and (e) keep them in the loop.

### *Listen to the Experts: Recommendations for Team Teaching*

According to the National Middle School Association (2003), one of the key ingredients in an effective middle school is team teaching. Four of the nine participants referenced the loss of team teaching as one of the contributors to low teacher morale, and, therefore, negatively impacted the overall school climate. Ending the team approach also ended some very well-established working relationships and cultivated feelings of isolation for new teachers.

A middle school is designed to serve as a bridge between the highly structured, self-contained elementary school and the loosely monitored, self-governing high school setting. Team teaching offers students the opportunity to visit different classrooms and experience different instruction while still maintaining the small group dynamic as they go from place to place with the same peers.

School leaders at Wilbur Middle would do well to revisit the idea of team teaching. There are various team teaching configurations that could be adapted to the new school's circumstances. Re-establishing teaching teams could help develop the collegial relationships that go along with strong school communities.

### *Be Seen, Not Just Heard: Recommendations for Accessibility*

Visibility is crucial to developing a community of trust. School leaders who rely solely on mass e-mails or memos in workroom boxes convey an air of dismissive detachment to their teachers. Conversely, administrators who purposely show up at grade level meetings and routinely pop into classrooms are seen as *human* and approachable and tend to evoke a more relaxed working environment.

The lack of direct communication between teachers and principals was a common topic during my observations and was discussed several times during interviews.

Although administrators were being pulled in many directions during the time of this study, a quick walk down the hall each day could have gone a long way toward easing some of the tension felt by their staff.

Another recommendation to promote a connectedness among stakeholders would be to locate one administrator in the main office and one in a central office in the sixth and seventh grade hallway. The campus of Wilbur Middle School is extensive, and teachers expressed a certain level of anxiety related to their isolation. Having an authority figure close at hand provides a certain level of comfort.

*Stroke Some Egos: Recommendations for Teacher Acknowledgement*

Teaching may not be financially lucrative, but historically teachers are self-motivated and take pride in their work. A career in teaching is sometimes overwhelming, especially in low-income communities where the occupation is often devalued and underappreciated. Teachers find themselves dealing with students who are not equipped to handle the academic expectations required of them with families who do not see education as a priority.

Five of the interviewees cited the need to have their efforts acknowledged by their peers and leaders as a component of a positive school climate. Small tokens of appreciation, like personal notes or individual e-mails, could counteract some of the stress and discouragement that goes along with the job. Remembering birthdays or asking how the family is doing gives teachers a sense of belonging and may heighten their job satisfaction (NTP, 2013).

The administrators at Wilbur Middle School should consider initiating measures to recognize their teachers and their contributions. Possible methods could include announcing birthdays or other milestone events, asking teachers to share their successful practices with fellow staff members, informing teachers when students or parents make positive remarks, and recognizing them for outstanding service like perfect attendance having few discipline problems.

*Be Still for a Minute: Recommendations for Maintaining Stability*

Change is necessary and often good. Forced change, however, can sometimes be disheartening for those involved. Sudden change can also lower morale, and too many changes at once can be stressful whether they are perceived as positive or negative. When teachers are faced with forced changes, sudden changes, and multiple changes all at once, the result is sure to be damaging (Hicks, 2011).

The teachers at Wilbur were faced with a multitude of adjustments concurrently. A new school, new teaching standards, and new evaluation requirements placed a great deal of pressure on everyone, but many were given the added burden of being reassigned to different grade levels or content areas. The teachers displaced during the transition were relocated without being contacted and without regard for seniority or teaching effectiveness. Ingersoll (2006) found that forced top down decisions cause teachers to feel deprofessionalized and disempowered. Clearly, many of the participants of this study substantiated this claim as they discussed their feelings with regard to their involuntary reassignments and the lack of communication they were receiving from administrators.

Teacher reassignment has been likened to teacher turnover in that even seasoned veteran teachers may appear to be *new* when placed in unfamiliar content areas (Feng & Sass, 2013). Involuntary transfers may hinder curriculum implementation and weaken the bonds between teachers and students (Riordan, 2015). During the research year, there were 12 teachers who involuntarily transferred within the school, as well as several teachers hired new to the system or to teaching altogether. This resulted in a lot of educators feeling ill-equipped to teach the new content effectively. Insecure teachers make unhappy teachers who, in turn, often become burned out teachers. It also worsens the state of trust among teachers and administrators.

Wong (2004) stated that what a teacher knows and shows in the classroom has the largest bearing on achievement, and the participants of this study expressed a strong desire to be knowledgeable and qualified to convey the content assigned to them. Therefore, it would seem to be in everyone's best interest to maintain some consistency in teacher placement, allowing teachers the opportunity to gain proficiency in the area they are teaching and to establish productive learning communities and supportive collegial relationships. Administrators should strive to offer the teachers a certain level of stability.

#### *Keep Them in the Loop: Recommendations for Effective Teacher Communication*

The first step to building authentic trust is to make concerted efforts to communicate honestly and clearly (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Communication is reciprocal; it must flow in all directions. However, it is often necessary that administrators initiate an open line of communication before teachers feel at ease coming to them with questions or ideas. Effective communication is essential in work

environments such as Wilbur Middle School where new job responsibilities, new working relationships, and new sets of skills are required (Kambeya, 2008). Clear communication is also vital to ensuring that all members of the school community share a common vision and set of values for the good of the students. Poor communication was definitely a prevalent difficulty at Wilbur Middle School. Teachers felt that they were being left out of decisions pertaining to their professional roles and to disciplinary actions. These teachers also felt ill-informed about policies and procedures instituted in the new school.

School leaders should consider establishing some direct and consistent methods of communicating with the staff. Weekly newsletters, scheduled faculty meetings, open door policies, and frequent e-mail contacts could facilitate the exchange of information and lessen the anxiety that results from not knowing. Administrators should strive to communicate early and often, preventing misconceptions before they become problems. Leaders should also reply to their staff members quickly, even if they do not know the answer to the question posed. A simple acknowledgement that concerns have been heard often serves to calm feelings of uncertainty or distrust for the teaching staff.

### Conclusion

This study is a snapshot of how school climate is perceived by teachers during a period of rapid transition. The research is qualitative and is based upon interviews and informal observations. The primary purpose of this study was to gain insight of the effects that multiple simultaneous changes have on the emotional and psychological well-being of the teaching staff. Participants were purposely selected based on their



backgrounds and teaching experiences, and observations took place in a variety of settings.

The participants of this study faced a multitude of physical, psychological, and social adjustments during the course of the research. The new middle school was actually housed in an outdated school building with cramped classrooms and poor access to technology. New performance standards and teacher evaluation measures were being introduced during this period, and the middle school had also been placed on the list of Focus Schools for its state.

Considering the multitude of changes being implemented by the state, it is not surprising that most of the teachers involved in the study felt an overabundant amount of job stress and a definite decline in morale. However, over the course of the study, it became apparent that much of the dissatisfaction stemmed from internal rather than external factors. Teachers cited lack of communication, lack of support, and lack of power as predominant reasons for their job frustration and indicated that these elements promoted an atmosphere of distrust among teachers and administrators. Coupled with extraneous factors such as the Common Core Standards and a Focus School status, the end result was a general perception by staff members of a negative school climate.

A good school climate is vital to creating and maintaining a productive and successful learning environment for all stakeholders. Positive school climates can foster positive relationships among teachers and students and directly impact student achievement and teacher job satisfaction (NSCC, 2013). Poor climates have been shown to directly influence the motivation of students and the motivation of teachers. Once established, it is very difficult to reverse the effects of a negative climate. Therefore,

assessing and addressing the condition of a school's climate could be beneficial for everyone involved in the school community.

Results from my study suggest creating a new school naturally results in creating a new school climate. The decisions made during Wilbur Middle School's first year have undeniably influenced the direction in which its climate will travel. School leaders need to reflect on their actions and the consequences emerging from them in order to diagnose and diffuse potential threats to staff morale and school spirit. The school climate may be improved if those making decisions have a clear awareness of where it stands and adopt effective strategies to strengthen it.

This study was limited in generalizability due to the unique circumstances of the school being studied. The sample size and demographic information (location, socioeconomics, etc.) must be taken into consideration when reviewing the data. These constraints may limit the generalizability of the study to other contexts, and, therefore, the findings of this study may not be completely applicable to all middle school settings. However, readers may find certain elements of the study to be synonymous to circumstances in their own school environments and the results of this study are significant to Wilbur Middle School itself because the district is building a new middle school and will be relocating once again within the next two years. The information from this study could help guide stakeholders in the process of setting up the new school community with as few impediments to a positive school climate as possible.

### A Final Note

*The truth is that I love this school. I'm proud of what we've done, and I just don't want to see it jeopardized.*

-Mrs. Motivation

This one simple statement completely embodies my motivation for conducting the research. This little school in the middle of nowhere is truly precious to me. I have been a member of this team for my entire teaching career, and I feel a genuine responsibility for the welfare of all of my school family. Although our ultimate goal as educators is to ensure and maintain a healthy learning environment for our students, we can never accomplish that goal unless our needs are also being met.

I am a firm believer in the power of teaching. A good teacher has the capacity to improve a child's life and to serve as a symbol of possibility. Gifted educators have the ability to bring out the best in both students and colleagues, and their positive support can overshadow many of the negative circumstances students may face. Over the years, I have had the privilege of working with many such teachers.

However, just as a good teacher can improve a student's situation, an ineffective teacher can be equally damaging to the academic and psychological well-being of a student. Teachers become ineffective whenever they feel helpless and burned out, and they tend to lose sight of the qualities most crucial for teachers: sympathy, patience, generosity, and motivation. All too often, exceptional teachers become mediocre educators due to stress and a poor working environment.

I do not want to see this happen to the teachers at my school. We have always been a strong, supportive family, and we have always appreciated the sense of

community that was established within our school. The close ties we created have brought us back here year after year, even though many of us could have moved to other teaching positions long ago. For me, this is home.

Now we seem to be at a crossroads, as our transition has ushered in a myriad of problems without a definitive plan for addressing them. The workload, the job displacements, and the lack of communication have created an air of uneasiness and low morale for many of my teachers. Many of the teachers feel alone or isolated and ill prepared to manage the day-to-day work related stress that they face.

Any organization is only as good as the people that belong to it. Our school has always been top notch because we have always been dedicated and loyal to our mission. If we are to maintain our positive environment, we must first assess what we are doing to impair it. Change cannot occur without recognition of what is in need of changing. Therefore, my purpose is to do my part to help rebuild the atmosphere that has made our little school successful.

The most notable implication of this research in my opinion is that there is an unquestionable need for policy makers to take a proactive approach to organizational change. Many of the difficulties encountered during this study may have been curtailed if measures had been taken to address potential problems beforehand. The thoughts and feelings of the teachers participating in this study should be interpreted as guidance to school leaders toward more effective practices.

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APPENDIX A:  
Initial Interview Questions

1. Describe your experiences as a student.
2. Did you experience any teachers, in particular, that stand out for you?
3. Describe the schools you attended (elementary, middle, high).
4. When did you know that you wanted to be a teacher?
5. Tell me a little about your teaching experience.
6. How would you define school climate?
7. How would you describe the climate of your school before the transition from K – 8 to two separate schools?
8. How would you describe the climate during the year of transition?
9. What do you perceive to be the reason(s) for changes in the school climate?
10. How would you characterize your relationships with your peers during the first year in the new school?
11. How would you characterize your relationships with your students during the first year in the new school?
12. How would you characterize your relationships with your administrators during the first year in the new school?
13. How would you describe the physical environment of the new school?
14. Are there any specific events or issues during the first year that have influenced your perceptions about the school climate?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to share?



APPENDIX B:

Sample Field Observation Report

Date:4/18 Time: 3:15	Location: Faculty Room	Context: Faculty Meeting
Codes	Observations	Reflection
Relationships Trust	<p>There are 26 teachers attending. The room is quite noisy, with most of the teachers having one on one conversations as they wait for the principal to arrive.</p> <p>The grade levels have separated themselves at different tables, and the coaches are also sitting together.</p> <p>The principal arrives and quiets everyone. He leads off by ensuring that he will not keep the staff very long. He has a legal pad where he has jotted his notes. He reads straight off of the tablet.</p> <p>The first order of usiness is “Safety, safety, safety.” I hear some obvious groans behind me. He follows by saying that teachers must not leave classes unattended for any reason. We are accountable for anything that happens in that classroom. Bathrooms must be monitored always. Students must not run at break. Teachers are to spread out during break and lunch duty.</p> <p>His next topic is maintaining a unified front. He tells the staff that we need to be aware of how we represent our school out in the community. “I may not like you, but nobody is going to know it. As far as anyone around town knows, we are a team and we love each other.” He cautions the teachers about their use of Facebook and making derogatory comments about</p>	<p>It is quite apparent that most of the people are exhausted to say the least. I can’t help but wonder how effective it is to have this type of meeting after a long day. I know that my attention span is long gone. I can’t help but wonder what has transpired to warrant the principal cautioning us about our interactions with the community. Are the teachers openly complaining? I do not Facebook, so I wouldn’t know what is being said through social media. I noticed that he seemed genuinely concerned about the matter. Are they talking about him?</p> <p>The meeting was depressing. I left feeling anxious and a little paranoid that I was somehow falling short of what I should be doing.</p>

	<p>the school, our students, or other teachers.</p> <p>He reminds the teachers that they are to differentiate instruction and that they must document it in their lesson plans. Teachers should also incorporate more writing into their lessons in all content areas. Administrators will be doing evaluations in the upcoming weeks and will be unavailable for a majority of the time. “In other words, don’t bother to write anyone up” I hear from someone sitting behind me.</p> <p>The teachers begin talking amongst themselves again. Several look at their watches.</p> <p>The principal ends the meeting by saying that education is getting harder and harder and that it is just going to get worse before it gets better. However, this school is better than most and the teachers should be grateful that they work in a system with so few problems.</p> <p>“Another feel good meeting,” one of the teachers says jokingly.</p>	
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APPENDIX C:  
Institutional Review Board Exemption Form



*Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
for the Protection of Human Research Participants*

**PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

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PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-03070-2014

INVESTIGATOR: Misty Robinette

PROJECT TITLE: A Year of Change: School Personnel Perceptions of School Climate During the Transition to a Middle School Configuration

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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is exempt from Institutional Review Board oversight under Exemption Category(ies) 1. You may begin your study immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research.

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**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS:**

Although not a requirement for exemption, the following suggestions are offered by the IRB Administrator to enhance the protection of participants and/or strengthen the research proposal:

NONE

☐ If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

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*Elizabeth W. Olphie*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

*5/21/14*

Date

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.*

*Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.*

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Revised: 12.13.12

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